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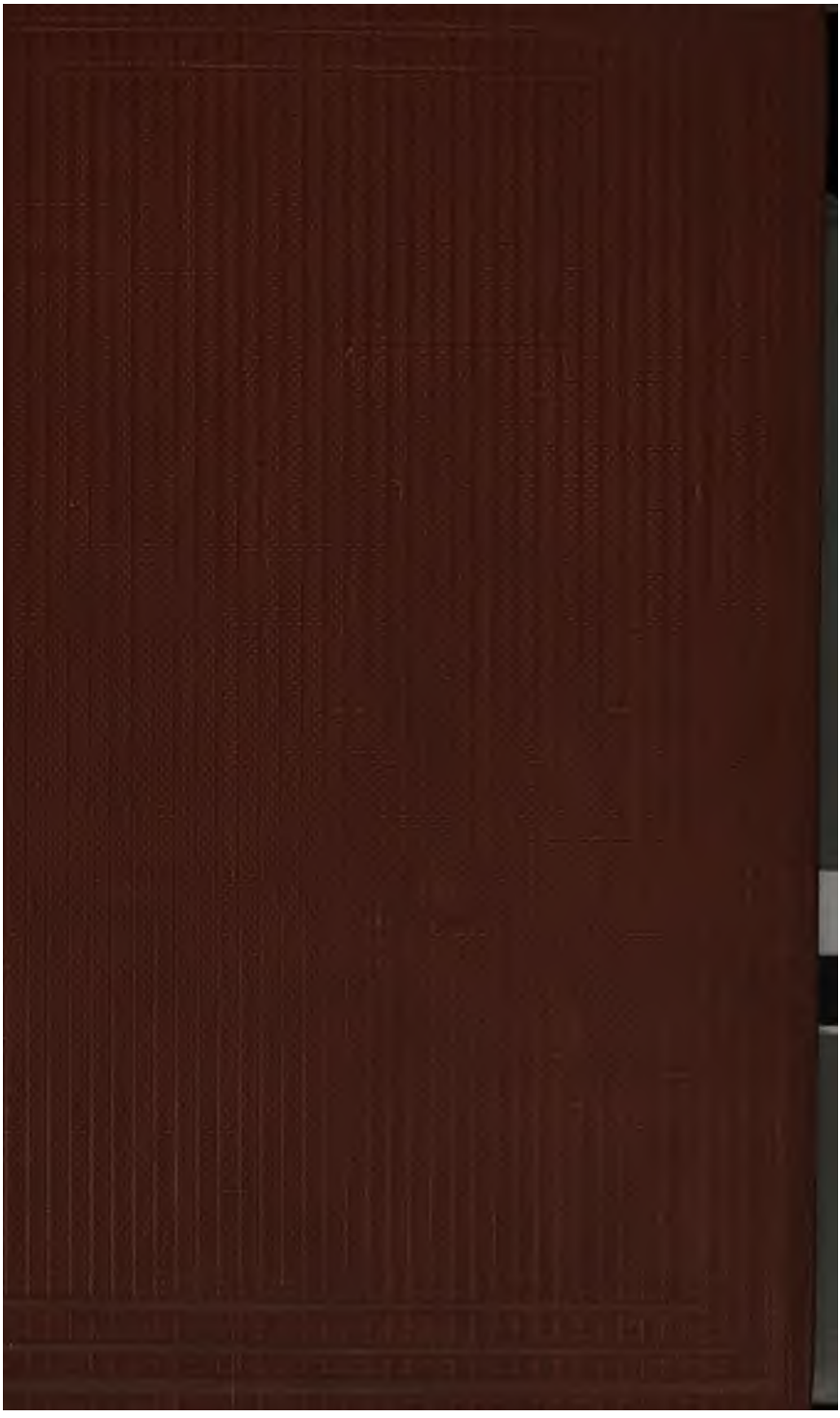

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# MARTIN POLE.

BY

JOHN SAUNDERS,

AUTHOR OF "ABEL DRAKE'S WIFE," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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# MARTIN POLE.

## CHAPTER I.

### THROUGH FALLING LEAVES.

"EPPIE, woman," said the wheelwright, pausing in his work one gorgeous autumnal afternoon, and letting the brown and yellow leaves fly back over the path he had just swept. "Eppie, woman, how long is it since Kit and her were here before; together, I mean."

Eppie, who was picking a bit of parsley, answered, without looking up—

"Five years, come Christmas, we all stood at the door waiting for Kit, and you says, 'set a light in the winder, father;' and he says, 'Jack, I can't find it,' he says. Oh, dear, dear, it seems as if it was but yesterday."

While Eppie lifted her apron to her eyes, and tugged at everything in the variegated border except parsley, the wheelwright turned towards a window, over which a white, thick blind was drawn, and fixed on it a gaze of mingled grief, reverence, and tenderness.

"I don't know, Eppie," he said, in a husky voice, glancing at the bright holiday aspect of all the other windows, "I don't know that it's the thing at all."

"What?" asked Mrs. Vallon.

"This visiting and love-making in the house just now; it goes again me more'n I thought it would. I wish she 'ud a kept away a bit longer."

Eppie straightened herself, and looked round at him.

"Father, father, you wouldn't begrudge the poor things just this hour o' pleasure. It's little enough they've had this five year. Of course, it goes again you, it goes again me to do the house up while *he* lies there; but I should like to see—poor dear—the lad's face without that

old, old careful look, if it was only for a few minutes."

"Well, well," answered the wheelwright, fetching back the truant leaves with his broom, "I wouldn't ha' planned it so; but as we haven't got time to put her off, and as things seemed to have planned themselves, let it be; we won't tell Kit about it till she's gone."

Eppie carried her apron of parsley into the house, apparently content; but while she stood at the window nipping and washing little bits to set round some dainty dish for tea, she threw very uneasy glances towards her good man, for she could by no means understand the taciturn humour that had been upon him since he returned from his morning's journey to Todness. Constance's little note, saying that she was at last going to pay them a hasty visit, he had seen on the previous evening; and he had appeared as well pleased as, in his state of mind, he could be. It had been his own idea that Christopher should not be told of a certain trouble which had befallen them until she had gone, and that nothing should

interfere with their pleasure, the few hours they would be together, that it was possible to avert. Eppie was not a little concerned, therefore, when on his return this morning the wheelwright showed unmistakeable signs of dissatisfaction at all the loving little preparations she had made for the young people; and wished they were not coming; that the day was over: and said many other inhospitable things, which she could not at all understand from him.

While she was still nipping her heads of parsley, and watching him uneasily, he came to the window with his hammer, to nail up a long rose-tree branch which had trailed to the ground, and lay with its bunches of small pale roses on the dead leaves.

"You're not so well again, father? You didn't get bad news in the town this morning?" Eppie said, as she saw him let the bough fall several times before he could drive the nail in.

The wheelwright, however, without answering, continued to puff, and blow, and hammer, until the rusty nail had taken hold; then he stood

leaning his elbows on the window ledge, watching her busy wrinkled fingers as she took the parsley out of the water.

"What do you say, old woman?" he began presently. "Will this really come to anything between Kit and her?"

"Come to anything! why, what *are* you talking of, father? God A'mighty grant it may! The poor lad's had no thought but her this five year come Christmas."

"Does Christopher tell you this? He never speaks to me about it."

"Why no," said Eppie, "a father's one thing, and a mother's another; though I don't know that he's *said* much to me, but he can't blind his mother's eyes, bless him!"

"But, Eppie," said the wheelwright, and so earnestly that he made the wrinkled hands quite tremble; "for God's sake don't keep anything from me now; do you know if the lad's going to make any move yet about her? but surely he isn't yet?"

"And why not?" demanded Eppie. "My goodness me, father, why nobody 'ud think as

you 'ud lived to see your son's name in the half-a-dozen papers he brought home last year, and which, please God, I'll keep by me so long as I'm spared; nobody 'ud think you had lived to see his name set up in print, like that, and to see him a gentleman, with a gentleman's ways and all—that they wouldn't, to hear you talk! Why shouldn't he go in to old Chorley with the best of them, and ask for his daughter, if he wants his daughter? She's a good sort of lass, but she's no more than other people's daughters to ask for, that I know on. But you're out o' sorts, father, and no wonder!"

"Eppie, tell me at once—I must know, when is Christopher going to speak to Chorley?"

She was quite frightened, for he had caught her sleeve, and was waiting for her answer with a face full of keen wistful anxiety.

"Father!" she exclaimed.

"Eppie, tell me."

"But it's a secret between me and Kit. I've known it ever so long, and kep' it for him. A lad can't tell his father everything."

"Eppie, tell me."

"Well then, yes, he is going to speak to her father; and why not? It's been all planned a long time since, and they're going to speak to the old gentleman when he comes back from London; and they're coming here to-day to settle between themselves and all of us about the time and all, and if you'd a waited you'd ef heard why. Why there he is, father; there is Kit. Make haste and undo the gate. Don't let him come in here till I've got my cap on."

"God help him!" said the wheelwright, lifting himself heavily from the window-ledge. "Poor lad! poor lad!"

The old black door having been left open, Kit and his companion had already entered the yard, and were stooping to acknowledge the vehement welcome of Merrylegs.

The wheelwright watched them as they came slowly up the path under the little trees which arched over their heads, and made pictures of them as they came along.

They had come by boat from Todness to Fair-

leigh, and Kit was looking a little tired and flushed, but so well and handsome, his father thought, in his light rowing dress, and so happy, that the sight of his face almost made him raise his finger and point to that closed white window at the corner of the house. But he refrained from doing so, and continued watching them silently as they came towards him. *She*, too, was looking very pretty, he could but own—more girlish and sweet, because happier, than ever he had seen her.

She reminded him, in her dress of pale pink muslin, and brown shawl and hat, of the faint autumn roses he had just been nailing against the rich leaves of the Virginia creeper; and as she drew near, the same kind of shrinking came over him that he had felt when he had bruised and crushed one of them with his clumsy hammer.

But she was close to him now, holding out her little hand with a timid yearning smile. He just touched it, and let it go, saying gruffly—

"Quite well, I thank you," though she had made no inquiry about his health, and then turned to Christopher.

"Kit," he said, "if Miss Chorley 'ud be so good as to sit down in the parlour till your mother's ready, I want to have a bit o' talk with you before tea."

"O pray, do not mind me, Uncle Vallon!" said Constance; "I'm not quite such a stranger here as to sit down in state and be waited upon. You can be as long as ever you like, Kit: I shall go and find your grandfather."

The wheelwright caught her arm, almost roughly, as she was turning away.

"Don't go to that side of the house, please; don't go near his room at all. We're all obliged to be quiet now; he's not well; he's took to his bed. I think she'd better sit in the parlour, Kit, if you please."

"Certainly I will do so, if you wish it," answered Constance, while a look of surprise passed between her and Kit. "I'm sorry to hear about grandfather."

"Thank you, yes. Come, Kit, we'll take a turn on the Knoll."

Constance stood in the porch looking after

them, through the fallen leaves, as they passed down the garden, and her eyes filled with tears. This long, rich, autumnal day had been so full of happiness for her, that her heart swelled with an almost passionate resistance at the weight and sickening foreboding which had fallen on it at the first tone of the wheelwright's voice. She watched them till the red foliage hid them from her, and then turned into the house. Though the little hall and parlour were gay with vases of fresh flowers, and possessed many comforts in the way of soft mats and pretty stands and chairs she had never seen in them in old times, and though the thick autumn sunbeams floated about, with the waving of the trees, like warm golden forms over the fresh carpet, yet there was such a chill, deathly silence throughout the house that she could not help shivering as she sat down. Kit's little brother, she supposed, must have been sent away on account of grandfather's illness, for the stairs which she could see from the parlour looked as spotless, white, silent, and desolate, as if no

child's foot had touched them through all time. The apparition of Eppie coming down them at last, in her stiff black satin gown and high crowned cap, made her actually start. She managed, however, to meet her old friend and future mother-in-law with a smile, though a very faint one, and that faded when Eppie let fall her hand directly she touched it, and said, "Be seated, miss."

She sat down, but before she could turn away her head, she felt the tears dropping on her hands, hot and fast.

It had been poor Eppie's nervousness which made her manner cold and stiff. Directly she saw, by the tears, that her boy's first love was the same sensitive, trustful little thing as ever, and not by any means the fashionable young lady she had sometimes pictured to herself during latter years—directly she saw this, her heart welled up with love for her, and she took the fragile, tearful face between her hard hands and kissed it with all motherliness.

"My child, my darling lassie! How pretty

she is! Come, let me look at her! Crying? O, what a silly lassie!"

While the "silly lassie" cried, and laughed, and blushed, with her face hidden in the bosom of Kit's mother, poor Kit himself was passing over some very thorny ground.

Too vexed to speak, he walked along by his father's side till the thick carpeting of leaves made him aware, without looking up, that they had ascended the Knoll—a little bit of wild wood, in which were packed, so close together as to almost shut out the air, some of the grandest old trees in the county.

They had hardly entered under the heavy shade of these trees before the wheelwright stood still, laid his hand on Christopher's arm, and said,—

"This will do, my boy; we needn't go further, only I couldn't tell you under the very same roof with her."

Kit's brown cheek went a shade paler, and he fixed an impetuous, questioning glance on his father's face.

The wheelwright sat down on a felled tree

trunk that lay right across their path, stuck his fingers through his hair, his elbows on his knees, and when he spoke seemed to be talking to some one whom he saw prostrate with a great sorrow on the dead leaves at his feet, rather than to the young man leaning against the tree opposite him, with a smile of confident, unshaken happiness.

"It's what comes on us all, my boy, sooner or later, just to show us what poor creatures we are, I suppose, by ourselves; a trouble that doesn't only hurt us when and where we stand, like a heavy blow, but a trouble that runs over a great piece of a man's life, years gone by and years coming, so that if you look forrads it's there, or back'ards and it's there too. I've had such a trouble in my day, Kit, and now there's one on you, and if I could take it on my own shoulders for you, God knows I would."

The wheelwright paused, rubbed his hands slowly together, and then plunged them into his hair again.

"My lad," he said, still looking on the dead

leaves, "you've worked hard these five years, and we all know what for."

He stopped, for though he had never once looked up, he felt that Kit's eyes were getting very keen and bright in their questioning but still proud and confident gaze.

Worked—ay, Kit had indeed worked these five years, how hard and bravely few could tell, and with little encouragement; for Daniel Chorley, though he had no power to keep Kit from passing over the breach between their two positions, and though he did not feel at all confident of keeping them apart when that breach was crossed, still, through his intense dislike for Kit, and a faint hope that Constance might yet change in her feeling for him, threw every possible obstacle in the way of their meeting or even writing to each other; and Constance was too well used to submission to complain now; while Kit, until his position was certain, was much too proud to think of making any resistance.

A strong assuring gaze from those sad sweet eyes, lifted to him Sunday after Sunday in the

old church, and now and then, perhaps, a moment's holding of hands in the crowded church doorway, a smile across the street—this was all Kit had had from year to year to keep his hope alive, but it was enough. It is true that sometimes he would let a little mock bitterness steal into his brown eyes as they met hers, but it was only to make her answering gaze yet more kind and tender, and he was really content.

"Yes, my lad," the wheelwright went on, "we all know how you've worked, and what you've worked for, what hope you had, and——"

"Hope!"

"Ay, Kit, hope; it was only hope. Don't be deceived, my lad, you could never have felt certain of her bein' your wife; you could only *hope* to win her, however hard you worked."

"Father, when I told you I would, I meant it. It's taken two years longer than I thought, but I believe it's done."

"Kit, when your mother was a learnin' you to walk, I've seen her take the wooden apple off the mantel-shelf, and hold it a little ahead to entice

you on; then, when you got up to it, she'd take it a bit further, and a bit further, and so on, and you got so savage after it that you soon walked, ay, and run too, quite wonderful; well, one day you grabbed hold of it, and set your teeth in it, and felt it was wood, and roared a good 'un; but Kit, your being disappointed in it didn't alter the good it had done in learnin' you to walk; and it's so with a greater One than your mother. He knows what poor creatures we are, and when he can't make us do our duty as we ought, he often sets something ahead of us, like your hope, my boy, that he means to take away before we reach it."

"For God's sake, father, what has this to do with me now?"

The wheelwright got up and laid one hand on Kit's arm and the other on his shoulder, and Kit dared not look down into his eyes, he *felt* they were so full of this terrifying, unendurable pity, for which he denied all reason.

"My son, if by cutting my right hand off I could save saying, Kit, you must give her up, I

would do it. Don't laugh like that, my boy; it's true; you must, you will. This little girl, Kit, as you've took into your heart, as we've all took into our hearts for your sake, isn't worthy of you; you must give her up; you mustn't go back to the house now to see her. No, no; hold still, and listen. Recollect now how she came to us first of all; what a mystery you yourself thought it, her leaving home after that fire. Recollect how many besides your uncle Humphrey warned us to have nothing to do with her; and how for all her seeming openness and meek innocent ways, there was always some kind of mystery about her we could none of us make out. Now recollect all this, Kit. You know where I went this morning, to Todness, to meet Rowbotham; well, he took me over the house he's building, and then we went and had a bit o' dinner at the 'Dolphin,' and we got talking o' one thing and another, till the Chorleys came up; and he was saying how old Chorley stood a good chance of being member o' parliament, and how bad his boy was going on, and what a wonderful lift

they'd had in the world since he went to Aberford, to take notes of the damage done by the fire; and then he told me, Kit; then he told me. I looked at the man as if I wished his words 'ud a choked him before they had reached my ears, and got up and came away without speaking. God knows when I should ha' told you, if your mother hadn't let it out that you meant to speak to Chorley at once; but now I must—no, don't sit down, Kit; don't laugh; stand up and listen and bear it as if I was going to fetch you a heavy blow. My boy, this thing's a mystery no longer. Yon woman, as you've worked for, and as you'd bring home to your mother to be a daughter to her, isn't fit to set her foot on our doorstep; but has done a thing, ay, and when she was little more than a child, that must ha' took the malice and passion of a devil to do. Kit, it was she set fire to the house, and might ha' burned her father and her little brother in their beds."

At first the wheelwright thought it was the sunlight flickering down through the red leaves

upon Kit's face, but when he had brushed some moisture from his own eyes with his coat sleeve, he saw that Kit was smiling; and his face, with the light of perfect faith and love upon it, was so beautified for the moment, that it reminded the wheelwright of Eppie in her early youth, and his own love dream, and his chest heaved.

"Don't look at me like that, my boy! it's true."

"Father," said Kit, and though he still smiled, his hand shook, and there was a kind of dull, smouldering fury in his eye, "that man shall answer for this. Let us go home. As you say, these things have been left too long unexplained. I have a right to ask her now what she has kept a secret from me all this time, and what she might have kept a secret to the end of our lives without *my* doubting her—I mean the cause of her leaving home as she did, which has given rise to this foul scandal. Come home, father; she shall not leave herself open to doubt one hour longer. She shall tell us all about it."

"My poor lad," said the wheelwright, turning away.

"I say she shall," and Kit's strong thumb and finger griped his father's arm like a vice, and pulled him over the dead leaves and knotted roots till they were out of the Knoll.

Kit threw the old gate open with a violence that made the black palings shake, and strode up the garden in advance of his father, who tried in vain to keep pace with him.

When the two men entered the little parlour, Constance was sitting on a stool at Eppie's feet; and Eppie was lifting and weighing the rich dark curls in her wrinkled hand.

"Constance."

The sound of Kit's voice made her rise instantly; but when she turned and saw them stand there, Kit with flushed face, and with eyes that almost glittered with restrained passion, and behind him the wheelwright, pale and wretched, she shrank back a step, and caught Eppie's arm.

"Constance," Kit said, made almost desperate by the look of suspicion with which his father's eyes followed this movement, "we have been

engaged five years, and all that time you have kept a secret from me. As far as I am concerned, you would be welcome to keep it all your life, but as things are, you can do so no longer. My father has heard some of the foulest lies about you concerning that fire that were ever breathed; he has heard that you yourself caused it. I am sorry to say, he believes what he has heard; because your leaving home, and your secrecy as to the cause, seem to him to make the story true. Now, Constance, I have refused to say one word in answer. The man who originated this calumny shall be answered in something harder than words; but it would be impossible for me to bear the thought that this kind of suspicion should have hold on my father and mother an instant longer. So I ask you, what I should, very likely, never have asked you if this had not happened, to tell them and me at once the whole story of this fire, and the cause of your leaving home."

It was strange that while these hurried yet measured words seemed cold and harsh enough

to the astonished Eppie, and even to the wheelwright himself, to Constance, who stood listening with her hand arrested a few inches above Eppie's arm, they expressed a more passionate love, a deeper tenderness, than Kit had ever yet revealed to her. When he ceased speaking, she stood still, her little hands laid tightly one upon the other before her, in that attitude of calm resignation habitual to her, and her eyes raised to Kit's face, with the awe and stupor of a mariner fascinated by the beauty of the tempest that is wrecking his ship. She knew that while Kit's husky, passionate voice had been like a new revelation of love, his words had enclosed some dreadful horror, the exact sense of which had scarcely yet reached her.

Kit yearned to go and put his arms about her, and tell her that he trusted against all the world; but in his outraged pride and exultant confidence, he chose that his father should see her stand alone in the strength of her innocence and repel his doubts.

It was several moments before she became con-

scious that the three stood there watching her and waiting for her to speak. What was it they wanted her to say? She turned her head from one to the other in bewilderment, then put her hand to her forehead, and recalled all that Kit had said, sentence by sentence, with wonderful accuracy. Her head fell forwards upon her breast, her hands folded again with the meekness of one who has long been used to endure. She understood all now; the curse of that one act of Daniel Chorley was to be visited upon his children still—had followed her past the old Plague Stone—and now, after ten long years, awaited her here, even in Kit's home. At first it seemed impossible to submit; and an overpowering impulse seized her to throw herself at Kit's feet, and tell him all, and clear herself to his father and mother for his sake, and to make good his trust in her. She would do so; surely they three were more to her than *him*. Yes, she would tell them all.

She guided herself across the room to where Kit stood, and fell with a great sob on his shoulder.

"Speak, Constance," he whispered, as much agitated as herself. "Speak quickly, darling, and have this over."

She tried to speak, but even while she sought for words to put her confession into, there darted across her mind a clear and distinct recollection of the promise she had made her father, and which he had made her solemnly repeat more than once. She started back from Kit pale and trembling.

"O, Kit, I cannot, I cannot. O, I dare not."

The wheelwright stood up and came between them, motioning her back sternly, and said to Kit—

"This is enough, my boy. Make no more misery for yourself; let her go."

"Go!" echoed Kit, looking round at her with heavy bloodshot eyes, as she took her hat and shawl from a chair, and began putting them on; "Constance, Constance, what is this? You have not spoken yet, and you are going!"

But she was not to be again moved. All

her old power of endurance and self-sacrifice seemed to have returned to her with renewed strength.

"Kit," she said, in a sweet mournful voice, as she gently put his hand from her, "do not touch me. You grieve your father. I am going, and I forbid you to follow me, or ever to seek me again, until he knows me better. Perhaps that may never be; if it depends on my answering the question you put to me just now, it certainly never will. But before I go, I wish to say this to you, Kit, and to your father and mother; I am as innocent of this thing with which I am charged as either of you three standing there; but I can give you nothing but my simple word. I cannot even say, 'enquire about me, or about that dreadful night when you saved my life;' on the contrary, I beseech you all to let things rest as they are, and to ask no more questions of this man from whom you have heard these things of me—a favour which, since I shall never trouble you again, I feel I have a right to ask."

Some minutes after the sound of her voice had

ceased, Kit, who had been sitting with his head bowed in his hands, looked up. The figure in the doorway had vanished. There was no one in the room but his father and mother, who stood on either side of him, each with a hand on his shoulder.

"What was it?" he asked, looking at them heavily. "Why did she go? Did she say it was true? Father, she didn't say it was true."

The wheelwright turned away from him without replying. *He* felt it to be true enough.

A look of intense anguish and desolation came over Kit's face as they watched him.

"I don't care if it is true; it was a minute's passion, such as we all have sometimes, nothing more. I shall bring her back. I don't care if it is true!"

He snatched his straw hat from the floor and went out. As he stood on the green looking about him with wild uncertain eyes, he thought he saw the flutter of a pink dress among the dark trees of the Knoll, through which the road to Fairleigh lay, and ran towards it. Yes it was

she. She heard his footsteps in the dead leaves, and stood awaiting him with a smile full of holy joy and triumph. She felt sure he came to tell her he still trusted her, and Kit's trust was a great treasure to bear with her into her solitary, joyless world.

As Kit reached her, he threw himself down on the leaves at her feet and caught hold of her dress.

"Constance! Constance! don't leave me! It was a minute's passion. If there's anything to forgive, I forgive it; but come back, don't leave me like this."

She gazed down upon him as he besought her, and spoke of forgiving her, and a look of surprise and anguish settled on her face.

She drew her dress away from him proudly and mournfully.

"Good bye, my friend. God grant there may come a day when you will know me better. If ever there should, remember that *I* forgive *you*."

She passed from him, on under the trees, and

the dead leaves fell between them with a sighing, dreary sound, that almost drove him mad. Gradually, as all hope fled from him with her vanishing form, his heart seemed to grow ravenous in assuring itself of her guilt. In his despair he could have shouted fearful names after her: it seemed to him the very bars of sunlight penetrating the wood were red accusing fingers pointing at her. With such thoughts as these he dared not go home; but got up and paced in and out amongst the melancholy trees, till those red sunset bars got lower and died out; and the heavy dews fell, till the yellow harvest moon looked down upon him. Then when he had starved all the bitterness out of him, and was only utterly wretched, he dragged himself home.

## CHAPTER II.

### LIFE'S LAST CHORDS.

EPPIE was sitting crying quietly over the untouched dainties in the parlour; the wheelwright was in the kitchen, alone, smoking. Kit went in and dropped into a chair, and, from very weariness, let his two arms fall on the table and his head on his arms. The wheelwright came and touched him gently on the shoulder.

"Kit, are you angered against me for having told you this? I told you I'd sooner cut off my right hand."

"No, no; but let me alone, father. I am sick of my life."

"But, my boy, your life wasn't give you to devote to one thing. There's a many things to live for still, and work for."

"Work," said Kit, lifting his head wearily.

"I shall never touch it again; everything may go."

"My boy, when your little twin sisters died I said those very words,—'I can't go to work again.' I said to your mother, 'everything may go'; and I didn't work, not for days and days. Eppie prayed and begged, but I was deaf to her; and I stuck in this chair like a block; and they had to sell things out o' the house for food; but one day your grandfather comes to me, and says in his helpless way, 'I'm so hungry, Jack,' he says: 'I worked for you when you was a boy; you'll never let me starve.' That fetched me round like a blow. 'No, God forbid me, father,' I said, and went out and worked till the sweat rolled off me. Kit, I worked for you when you was a boy; it's time I got a little rest now. I've had a break down, my boy, since you were home before; and it might ha' been too much for me, if I hadn't felt I'd got you. Kit, my lad, you must be something more than a son to me now."

Kit looked up with a quick interrogative glance.

It was the first time he had thought of grandfather that day. Now he remembered his father said he was lying ill.

"Come and see him, Kit," said the wheelwright; "maybe it 'll do you good."

Kit rose mechanically and followed him to the foot of those white, silent-looking stairs. There his father paused and said "hush;" and gently put off his boots. Kit's rowing shoes were thin, and made no noise as he followed him up. They stopped outside a door opening on the narrow strip of landing — the same door which had so often been slammed to impatiently, to shut out the noise of grandfather's fiddle.

The wheelwright pressed down the latch as softly and gently as though he feared to awaken some light sleeper in the room; and, entering, he motioned silently to Kit to follow him. They did not go many steps, but stood still midway between the door and the bed: the long, narrow bed standing there in the moonlight awfully white, and smooth, and stiff, rising grave-like in

the middle with the outline of a rigid, silent form.

"My boy, you must be more than a son to me now."

Kit looked on the still figure in silence, and his chest heaved. Grandfather had been to him nurse, playmate, master; and he felt as if the last link that bound him to his bright, happy boyhood had broken, and he was now a grave and careworn man, in whom all the restless ambition and passionate fervour of youth was dead.

While they stood looking, Kit started, for there on the pillow lay one dark object. The wheelwright saw his look, and nodded, saying, with a quivering lip and a voice of broken tenderness—

"Ay, it's the fiddle you gave him, Kit. He would have it to the very last; and, as one may say, he played hisself out with it, and we don't like to take it away now. It's always been a wonderment to me why the Almighty should ha' give him that passion for music, and not one

bit o' talent for it; but oh! lad, we can't judge of these things, we can't; for, Kit, when he lay here a-scrapetin' and a-scrapetin' with his last bit o' strength, all of a sudden he drops the fiddle, and starts up and falls a-listening, and his face flushes and brightens up like a young man's, and says he, 'Hark! hark! music! music! Do you hear? There it is, what I have been trying to do all my life. Ah, now I can play—now I can play!' And he fell back, and never spoke another word, and I thought as your mother's heart would ha' broke, she's always been so hard on his fiddle. There, come, lad, come; his music 'll never jar on us again. If he ever plays now, he plays like them as played away his soul. Kit, Kit, I thought I'd got over it, but he was my father, and he's gone. He was the head o' the house, and he's cut down. O Kit! O my boy!"

Kit led him gently from the solemn little room, and back to his place by the kitchen fire; and the two men sat up alone all night, drawing comfort from each other without either speaking a word.

## CHAPTER III.

### WOUNDED, TO THE COVERT.

KNEE-DEEP through the ferns; unconscious of the beaten track that she might so easily have found; gliding in the moonlight past the chequered trees—here black, there almost silver; —meeting no one; incapable of any active thought, of any wish or any fear; feeling only the unutterable anguish of her sudden loss, which quite shut out the sense of her cruel wrong, Constance passed alone through the thick old woods that lay between her and her home.

Continuous bodily movement was the sole thing that seemed capable of giving her relief, and of enabling her to bear the now intolerable load of life. Once only she stopped, as if in meditation, and seemed to hesitate; and then

she seated herself on the wall of a low bridge that spanned a gleaming water-course, and sat a long time motionless.

Fantastic shadows from the neighbouring trees played about the whitened ground at her feet; and her eyes felt a kind of charm in watching them, as the tangled forms separated and met again in dreamy play. She could not look up; she knew the moon was shining there in wondrous beauty, and would mock her by its tender smile.

And then, in spite of the strong will which had persisted in shutting out all thoughts of the past, she found herself insensibly gliding back to the night of the fire, and to the room in her father's house at Aberford; to the terrible burning beam above her head, that had seemed to her a flaming gigantic sword about to fall; to the pangs of her passage to the very gates of death; and to the sight of *his* face, so earnestly turned upon her as he bore her away in safety in his strong arms. From thence it was only too easy to pass to that walk by the water side, under the towering

chestnuts, and to stand there again listening to his wild whistle as it mingled with the sounds of the river; and to shudder at the recollection of her new-born happiness, and at those dim but delicious revelations of the depth and richness of life. It were well if she could have stopped there. But she hears once more that cry across the shingle—"Constance! Constance!" which had brought her tremblingly back to him to receive the first kiss of love.

"O God! this cannot be true!" she cried. She stood up in a trembling ecstacy, her arms outstretched, and her lips quivering with the yet unborn cry that should now respond to his, and bring him back, when a new emotion stayed her, and she dropped down on her seat with head bent, hands falling helplessly by her knees, and she wept long and bitterly.

But she rose at last, and resumed her journey. Thorns pierced her feet, and she moaned with the unexpected pain. But it was not they that forced from her the almost childish cry, but the thought

of him who only a few hours ago had been so careful of her every step.

By the time she reached home, she felt only a kind of dull, aching sense of mental suffering; for her nervous and sensitive frame—worn out by fatigue, bruised by the stones, and pierced by the thorns,—was in torture; and made her frequently say to herself, "O to lie down—and rest—even if it were for ever! O, if I might but rest!"

She was glad to remember that her father was away from the house. She could shut herself up in her own room, and wrestle or submit, as God might please. But what is this she sees? Lights in all the windows; carriages going into and coming out of the court-yard; men with trays on their heads from the neighbouring confectioner's, stooping as they pass into the house through the low door in the basement. Her father must have come home—must be giving a supper. He will be wanting her. "O, not that! not that, now!" she cried, as she glided across the moonlit road, to enter by a private door, used only by the family, and of which she had a key.

In the passage she met the maid whom her father had lately forced upon her as a necessary adjunct to his and her social position.

"I am so glad, Miss, you have come. Mr. Chorley has been back some hours, and been asking for you. He sent a messenger by the Beverley road to meet you. Did you come that way?"

"That way!" repeated Constance, vacantly, as she looked at the woman. She then put her hand to her head—trying vainly to remember anything she had seen or been conscious of for the last hour or more—since, indeed, she had left the wood; then she was about to pass on, but recalled the words about her father.

"Tell him—I—I am not well to-night, and have gone to bed."

"He'll be so vexed, Miss, for he's been elected alderman, and he has hurried back from London to join the gentlemen to-morrow, which is a great corporation day, and they all go some miles down the river, and dine together. And he has invited some gentlemen to a breakfast here before they start in the morning, and they are now getting

everything ready in the dining-room—setting out the table—just as if it were for something very grand, a wedding breakfast, or something of that kind. And you are to go with him; other ladies are going."

"Tell him I will come down by-and-bye."

Even more passionately now than before did Constance yearn to lie down on that white bed of hers, and turn her face from the light, and try to sink into unconsciousness. To have to talk, to enter into all the worldly interests and views of her father, to seem as if everything in the world was going on for her as of old, yet to know that to her henceforward the world was but one huge graveyard; where the only difference between the living and the dead was that the one must suffer while the other was in possession of eternal rest—all this was horrible. Could she do it? She knew not.

She opened her bed-room door; the light was falling on the bed, giving to it an almost sepulchral whiteness. She looked at it; she looked at the great round orb that seemed so full of

divine happiness that it could not, perhaps, but think the mere sight of its happiness ought to be enough to assuage the sorrows of poor benighted human kind; looked at the ghostly shadow on the wall of a bending woman made by the drapery of the curtains, then gave one upward look, one toss of the clenched hands, one thrill of anguish where body and soul alike met in a new communion, and then threw herself on the bed, face downwards, and forgot her father, herself, and everything in the world but *him*, and his thought that she must be guilty.

For an hour, or more, she lay thus undisturbed, for Mr. Chorley had found occupations that prevented him from thinking of his daughter; and happily she slept. Happily, for she thus obtained new strength. But to Constance, herself, that first moment of waking was the hardest of all to bear. How she had bounded up at the first glimpse of light on the morning of that very day, radiant with the faith that at last she and her lover were to be repaid for their many years of sacrifice! But though, as she raised herself

and gazed around, the lips were quivering with intensest pain, they no longer gave forth any cry. And the eyes were at last drained of all their moisture, and knew the time had gone for the indulgence of tears.

She washed her face, tried to cool her burning brow, smoothed her hair, and was conscious of a vague wish that her father might not notice her, or ask any questions about *him*. Then, too, she suddenly recollected a particular danger.

"No, no, I must not tell him. He would endeavour to save me by sacrificing himself." And then a bitter smile just flickered about the lips, at the thought that she possibly might thus regain Kit.

She went out on the landing, and stood leaning over the banister, looking down on the brilliant light streaming across the entrance hall. She heard busy footsteps moving in the dining saloon; the ringing sound of glass that had been accidentally touched; and then the dull heavy thud of some ponderous body that was being moved. Trying to collect her thoughts to under-

stand what was passing, and instinctively conscious that she would thus best prepare herself for the dreaded but inevitable interview with her father, she suddenly tightened her grasp of the rail, as she remembered the interview she had expected to have had with him this very night, as the result of her meeting with Kit. Constance made out at last that they were placing the new statue, which her father, as a patron of local genius, had recently bought; and which he desired, no doubt, to display to his guests of the morning. Presently she heard her father complaining that the statue did not stand safely on the tall pedestal; and then a strange voice, probably the sculptor's, said—

"The floor gives way unequally below it, and must be strengthened, and then you will find both the statue and the pedestal immoveable. But I think you may venture to leave it where it is, till after your breakfast to-morrow."

Constance delayed now, as she had delayed before, the going down stairs; the sculptor's presence giving her a new excuse. So she fled

back, as a wounded bird goes to its nest, or a stricken deer to its covert, and sat down on a low chair by the bedside, and let her hand rest on a little table. In doing this she touched a letter. She clutched it with an almost joyous cry:—

"It is from him,—sent up while I have been listening. O Kit! Kit! Kit!" She ran out to fetch a chamber light which was burning on the landing, came back, looked at her letter, and O! the sickness of heart as she saw that it was not from him—it was from 'Duke, her brother.

As soon as she could read it—she did so. These were the contents:—

Trin. Coll. Cam., Thursday.

DEAR OLD CON,

I am once more in trouble, and to whom can I come for help but to you, my good angel, my own ever dear—dear sister?

You know what a miserable allowance father gives me, three hundred a year—and you know my fortune by and bye, nearly eight thousand a year, and with no encumbrance except you, my dear old Con—and my very narrow-minded stingy

governor. Well, this is how the matter stands. After getting deepish in debt, and after borrowing at awful interest from Jews and other gentry of the same kind who wouldn't let me alone—I am obliged to say—father really must help me out of the scrape once more, and set things straight. You know, dear old Con, it isn't his money, though 'pon my life I sometimes fancy he thinks so. But by Jove if I were to die, he'd find his mistake. I've been obliged to go into affairs a bit, and I have discovered that I have only what they call a life interest in the property, and that it must go to my heirs—if I get any. Funny idea—isn't it, of the old colonel? He seems to have been "family" mad.

Will you, dear old Con, try once more what can be done? I daren't tell you till I see you how much money I must have. But this I'll promise you. Never more to know even of the existence of a Jew or money-lender. Never again to exceed—much—my allowance. And when I get of age, I'll take care to settle on you and the governor every shilling that I can spare

for the first few years to make you both independent. So don't think me so bad after all—whatever I or others may tell you. You won't, will you, my own dear dear old Con, that I went once wandering about the world with, like two beggar children.

You will get this early in the day, and you will see me following it late in the night. Things have come to a crisis. But I have said enough. God bless you, and save you from ever being as miserable as your brother

MARMADUKE.

Not even the presence of a despair so great, and which seemed to envelope her as with the folds of a serpent, that waited only its own chosen time to press the life-blood from her heart, could make Constance insensible to this appeal. Next to Kit, all her affection had been lavished on 'Duke; for, unlike her father, 'Duke returned her love, and was proud of it; not so much for her sake, as for the satisfaction it gave him to be properly appreciated.

She read, and read again, and then let her

thoughts go back to the time he had referred to. Once more she saw the golden curls of the boy as they floated about by the plague-stone while he was letting loose his bird; once more she felt the warm soft flesh of his legs as she held him in her arms towards the close of their second day's adventures, when he had begun to cry with fatigue and hunger, and to repine that they had left their home, and she had snatched him up, and borne him along till she dropped senseless on the heath beneath the burden. Once more she saw him crossing the moor between the golden furze on his way to school, and remembered her thankfulness to God that he was safe at last.

Had she judged correctly in this? she now asked herself, as she had often asked before, during 'Duke's years of college life. And that question led to another, and more perplexing one. Ought she not to have kept him there? Had she done right to come back to her father in his prosperity, and replace 'Duke under his influence? She could not conceal from herself

that 'Duke's nature was not like her own, sown with desires for an ideal life of goodness, and beauty, and love, but rather with seeds that sprang into a fearful growth of boundless indulgence. Compelled to exertion in a different walk of life he might have turned out kind, industrious, and able to achieve some sort of intellectual, possibly artistic, skill. He had been fond of drawing at the school to which the Vallons had sent him. But he was fond of nothing but sport, and of boyhood's worst excesses, at the school to which he was removed as the heir of the rich Colonel Armstrong. College had finished his education in this way, by relieving him of such small control as the Rev. Mr. Garway had cared to maintain over his more distinguished "young friends." But why dwell on the story? Is it not common enough? Do we not habitually, and almost as a part of the religion of society, yearly send to our universities a due supply of all the young blood of the best English families, in order that they may there be weeded by the speedy destruction of the weakest; who go home,

some to die of disease, some to live a melancholy memorial of how the learning of christian England teaches the doctrine—the race is only to the strong; some to witness through a long life of shame the poverty to which they have reduced poor and decayed, but still hopeful parents, who had staked their all on their boy's future.

Only dimly could Constance see these things, as she wondered why it should be a part of the ordinance of things that youth should go forth so fresh and eager and full of exulting hope, and come back so utterly wrecked. But what did those words of his mean, that she was not to care about what others might say of him? What could they say of him? His extravagance did not concern them. It was foolish, no doubt, and must be owing to her own present depressed way of looking at things, but she could not get rid of the fear that 'Duke had not told her all, or the worst.

She thought she would now go down and see her father. Perhaps she might prepare him not to be too angry with 'Duke. Then thinking to

please him by saying she had been getting ready for the morning, she took out from the wardrobe a white silk dress he had purchased for a recent flower-show, and laid it on the bed. This she knew he would wish her to wear; so to soften its display she put out a gauzy black lace dress to wear over the white; and then a sudden sob and passion of tears broke from her, for she thought the white silk looked so like a wedding dress. This again rendered necessary fresh delay, and fresh bathing of the silly eyes, and of the feverish cheeks. By that time her candle had burnt out, so she sat down motionless by the bed, looking at the costly dress that lay across it glistening in the moonlight; for she felt as if she could not move it aside, but must sit there looking at it with a kind of fascination.

Minute after minute did she thus sit with her eyes fixed on that white, lustrous heap upon the bed, till a full hour had passed; and the moon, which for some time had waxed dimmer and dimmer, at last left her little room in utter darkness.

Then she could be still no longer; and, rising with a low, shivering sigh, she opened her door, glided down the first flight of stairs, and stood looking again into the hall, which was now only dimly lighted. The house was very quiet. The servants had been sent to bed some hours ago, and only two persons besides herself were stirring. Mr. Chorley was waiting 'Duke's arrival from London; and Constance could hear him pacing up and down his study, picturing, no doubt, both for his son and himself a magnificent future: already there was a talk, as has been said, of the latter being elected to Parliament. The other nocturnal watcher was a maiden relative of Mr. Chorley, who had chosen to keep guard all night over the long dining-room table, which was already spread with delicacies for the aldermanic breakfast.

The door stood open; and, as Constance leant over the banisters, she could see, by the light of the one wax candle, the tall, straight figure of Miss Martha Chorley, stalking up and down each side of the table in her black dress, arranging

and re-arranging the plates, the bouquets and other decorative ornaments, with a funereal solemnity that seemed not out of keeping with the stony, set face and joyless eyes that were watching her.

And now too, through some movement of Miss Martha with a candle, light fell upon the statue just within the entrance arch; where no doubt Mr. Chorley had thought it would be very impressive to his expected visitors. Constance knew it well, a spiritless version in marble of the fine old idea in which justice, typified by the sternly beautiful features of a female divinity, is blinded so that she may see no distinction of persons, but holds evenly balanced scales in which to weigh the deeds of men, and a sword for the punishment of the guilty. The statue had not impressed Constance; but she had no doubt her father's idea was a noble one, that of placing before his eyes hourly a reminder of the exalted spirit in which the duties of the magistrate should be performed.

And thus a long time passed, and never once

did the expression of that white, watching face change. But at last, as the hall clock struck four, the still figure bending over the banisters straightened itself stiffly, and then shrank down shivering on the stairs with a low, smothered, pleading cry of—

"And will it be so? O my God, my God, will it be so, that I shall never see him again, and that he will die believing me—what his father said?"

At this moment a violent ringing of the house bell, followed by an impatient knocking at the door, made her start. 'Duke then had come, and she must collect herself to stand between father and son.

As she listened to assure herself it was 'Duke, she became aware of a strange creeping feeling all over her that she could not understand; it was as though some dreadful thing, which no human eye could see, were passing by, and touching her. Perhaps it was only the recollection of how she had similarly stood on the landing of the old house at Aberford, looking down into the darkness and listening; and, how out of that night

so awful an event for her had arisen,—perhaps it was only this that affected her with so superstitious a feeling just now. Whatever it might be, her whole frame shuddered, as she said to herself once more,—

"What is going to happen? O, what is going to happen?" And then, almost with a smile, she murmured, "As if anything more could happen for me!"

It was not 'Duke she heard enter a moment after. It was Mr. Massey the lawyer, who had had the management of the property under Colonel Armstrong, and who still retained it under Mr. Chorley's temporary rule. Thinking it was 'Duke (who had announced his coming to his father also), Mr. Chorley went forward to the entrance hall.

"Massey—that you?" he exclaimed, as he saw who it was who came with so much uproar into the house at daybreak.

"Yes, Sir, it's me," Constance heard him say. And then his voice dropped, and he was probably whispering. But her father seemed transported

with rage. She heard him—while her blood curdled with horror—giving vent to a volley of imprecations, as the two men went on together through the saloon, and so into Mr. Chorley's private study.

"What can be the matter?" she asked herself, sinking in heart, as she knew that she was no longer able to act as of old. Heroic fortitude and self-sacrifice seemed delusions now. Even the misery of her father and brother no longer appealed to her as they would have done under any other circumstances. She would have given anything that she possessed to benefit either of them, if anybody could have pointed out how the particular sacrifice was to be made. But the faith that armed her for any kind of forlorn hope was dead; for love was dead—and life was thenceforward meaningless.

Presently there came another and still more furious knocking at the door. This, as she expected, brought forth her father and the lawyer; the former in a state of such excitement that Mr. Massey found it impossible to get him to

listen to any advice, however timely, necessary, or prudent.

Miss Martha let in the new intruder.

"Ha! Miss Chorley—have I kept you up? Never mind. You look younger than ever," was Duke's salutation; which seemed to be received in grim silence by the ancient lady, for no reply was heard. Then there was a laugh, and then a rapid step heard, and then in a moment more Constance saw her brother, through the imperfect light, moving across the hall towards the saloon. How she watched and listened!—her heart the while almost ceasing to beat under the growing sense of impending calamity. No wonder that every incident, however trivial, of the next few minutes was for ever afterwards burned as with a hot iron into her brain.

"Father!" was the young man's salutation, as he met the two advancing forms. There was no reply.

"Father, I am very sorry that——" Then Constance heard her father interrupt 'Duke in what he was going to say, and the tone of his

voice was so unnatural, that she would not have recognised it as his, if it had been possible that anyone else could have been there, and so spoken.

"Are all these bills correct?" There was a pause—and then 'Duke said,

"I—I—believe so. The fact is, they think I am leaving College, and so have got suddenly uneasy."

"Do you know the total amount?"

"Not exactly."

"Tell him, Massey."

"Thirteen hundred and sixty nine pounds," said the harsh, grating voice of the lawyer, who was, not the less, striving to speak in the most soothing and expostulatory of tones.

"And that is the excess of a single year, over and above your allowance!" said Mr. Chorley.

"Well, father, I know it's wrong, but don't be hard on me. You know I can afford it."

It was the kind of literal truth of this saying that probably drove Mr. Chorley at once beyond all bounds of reason or self-control.

"Marmaduke!" he cried. "You have forged on me."

Mr. Massey now interfered, and endeavoured to give 'Duke time for recollection, by explaining what had come to light. As well as Constance could make out, 'Duke had tried to raise a considerable sum of money on the security of his future property, and had been obliged to undertake to get his father as trustee to join him; and that 'Duke, secretly considering the whole property as his own particular affair, appeared to have persuaded himself that he might anticipate his father's consent by himself affixing his signature. This, then, was the thing so darkly hinted at in 'Duke's letter. But there was no longer time for Constance to reflect, she must act.

She tried to totter down the stairs to get between them, but her knees forbad their office, and she sank against the banister,—every faculty paralysed by this new charge, which seemed to have an inexplicable connection with the charge against herself, were it only in the extent of the

guilt imputed. Breathlessly she waited for 'Duke's indignant answer. None came. It was her father who again spoke.

"You do not deny it?"

And still 'Duke was silent. He was guilty, then. 'Duke guilty! Her own dear brother, for whom she had risked and suffered so much to keep him pure, and truthful, and honest—he a forger!

"O God, where art thou?" Constance inly murmured. And now still more menacingly rose the father's voice,—

"Speak! is it true? Do you own yourself so black a villain?"

Why did not 'Duke speak? Why did he not do as he had said to himself he would—make the best of things, and play the penitent so successfully, that he might yet triumph among his companions over all obstacles? His silence seemed to madden the old man, as if the latter knew instinctively that there was rising in his son's breast passions furious and unscrupulous as his own. But if 'Duke would not speak, the father could not be silent.

"I will expose you. The whole world shall know that ——"

"No, father, you won't do that"—came at last from 'Duke's lips, in a low, significant tone, though the voice a little trembled, as if at its own audacity. Constance would have given worlds to have been by his side now; to have clasped him in her arms, so that she might strangle at its birth the lurking thought that she felt was about to issue forth. She did with sudden effort rise, and get down two or three stairs, when she stopped in awe of the passing event over which she knew she had lost all control.

"And why not?" fiercely demanded Mr. Chorley.

"Because, father, I, on my part, know that which you would not like to have known—and ——"

The words are stopped in the speaker's throat —there is a frightful struggle—a violent fall against the pedestal of the statue—a hoarse shriek of alarm from the lawyer—and an instant after the house is shaken to its foundations by

the fall of the marble statue, beneath which lies the crushed form of the erring but unhappy youth.

Constance never afterwards knew how she passed from that state of death in life which had so perplexed her. The next thing she could remember after listening so near the top of the stairs, was seeing the statue lifted aside from 'Duke's body, as she stooped down to see if any life remained.

Daniel Chorley watched her as she lifted the bleeding flaxen head on to her lap—watched her as if his own life hung upon her look.

She sat on the ground with her back towards him. He clutched the lawyer's arm with clammy fingers for support, while watching her, and feeling certain she would presently turn, and dispel, by a glance or word, the horrible dread that was creeping over him. One moment of awful suspense, in which he seemed to endure years of agony, passed. Then he saw her head moving. She would turn—ah, yes, she would surely turn—and tell him what his very soul ached to know.

O what he would forgive! O what his life should henceforth be if she did but turn and tell him that 'Duke lived.

At last she did turn, and looked at him wistfully, but with no such tidings in her face as he thought to see there—looked up at him only to shake her head with a ghastly, hysterical smile, and then she fell back and lay almost as white and still as the dead face upon her lap.

## CHAPTER IV.

### DAYLIGHT SHADES.

It was March; the finest morning the new year had yet brought forth. Children stood at the street-corners of Todness with spare little bunches of primroses to sell, and the fruiterer's shop under the castle wall was a perfect little Eden of flowers and moss. All the poor invalids of St. Clement's swarmed to the beach and parade like so many sun-worshippers come forth to do homage to their god at his first relenting smile.

The fishermen sang as they mended their nets; the girls dawdled as they went down to the shingle with their baskets of linen on their heads; and the little children, tired of shouting and making war with the beach-stones, lay down at full length at the very edge of the sea, and stared at it as if every placid, lazy wave rolled towards them

were a fresh volume of wonder. Although the sun shone down so warmly, the colour of the sky was pale—quite a pure and tender azure—but almost sad in its paleness, as it made you feel that the beauty of the spring morning was to be but fragile and transient—not a thing to last—to grow and deepen into summer. More winter storms were yet to gather and burst, more heavy rains to fall. The line of trees on the hill at the back of the town laved their black tops in a stream of pale gold light, and all the grass on the hill-side rippled sunnily, as if it felt the daisies astir amongst it. Pale invalids who had passed each other all the last summer and all the winter, each pitying the other, yet each resenting a pitying look himself, were seen that morning actually exchanging smiles of sympathy—some even discussing their maladies as if they had been friends for years. No one thought of congratulating his neighbour on the spring having set in; it seemed as if each feared that winter, on whom she had stolen a march, would hear, and rise up, and drive her back, stifling her sweet warm breath with his icy

hand; silencing her singing birds by his fierce war blast; and planting his black banner in the heavens, where her tender, peaceful colours were now hung. But though very little was said at Todness that morning concerning the happy change of weather, almost every face, from the idle loungers on the parade down to that of the fisherman singing over the great holes which the unusually bountiful draught of fish had made in his net, bore grateful record of it.

Across this brilliant panorama, two figures were seen to pass slowly, from end to end of the parade. The man must have been naturally tall, but was now so bent and shrunken that the woman whose arm he held seemed the taller of the two. His face was thin and deeply lined, yet seemed, in spite of its age, as if it had only recently fallen away, for the skin hung unpleasantly down the sides of the cheeks, and at the edge of the chin. He took off his hat to answer the respectful salutations that from time to time greeted him in spite of the worn character of his dress, and other signs of extreme poverty, and

then the whole head appeared covered with long silver threads, that glittered and waved about in the sunshine and the light breeze. He was very feeble, and evidently needed the woman's arm; who, for additional security, let her other arm cross her breast, so that the hand might clasp his hand, and she might know he could not, by withdrawing it, fall suddenly, and without timely warning to her.

The woman was young, and might have been beautiful under different circumstances. If so, she had changed sadly. The smile that had once suggested to a delighted gazer on her face something so sweet and ineffable that he could compare it to nothing but the gleam of primroses and daffodils, was now rigid, mournful, almost stern. Her dress was also very shabby; and—through the dust of the road along which they had travelled, or through the pre-occupation of her thoughts by more serious matters—almost seemed to be worn without even the ordinary sense of womanly neatness. Thus when her father had insisted on stopping half a mile off to wash his

hands and face, and had given a cottager a penny out of their last remaining pittance to lend them the wherewithal to brush their clothes and boots, she had stood aloof, as if unconcerned, till he was ready, when she again gave him the bodily support he needed. And then it had been that she had said to him her last word of remonstrance:—

"Father, can you not even yet spare us both the humiliation of thus showing ourselves? There is a road over there on the right by which we can get into the country at the back of the town, and save a mile or two." But she no longer pleaded as she would have done in such a matter at a former time. She spoke coldly, as if conscious she would fail, and had lost the mental elasticity that made failure a thing to be resisted.

"Don't begrudge me, Constance, this little pleasure," said the old man, with tears in his eyes, and she said no more. And so they reached Todness, and passed along the sunny parade; their two black, slowly-moving figures being the whole way the subjects of universal observation and

remark among the busy and picturesque assemblage of pleasure and health seekers.

Although she objected no further, the woman seemed to shrink from the observation that the man courted. She scarcely looked to the right or the left: only once her lip might have been seen to tremble with the burden of speech that must never more be spoken, as she gazed for a single instant on the beauty of the glittering sea, and remembered a particular incident that had once happened to her on the neighbouring shore.

"How kind they all are! You see they have not forgotten me!" said the old man, who found another sort of sunshine in the respect that was shown to the "unfortunate gentleman" who was commonly said to have lost, on the same day, his son and his property in the town.

When they had reached the other end of the parade, the old man exclaimed, suddenly—

"Hark! why there's music coming from the house. They might at least have spared me this outrage in my hour of adversity. Don't you think so, Constance?"

She did not answer. She gave just a hurried glance at their stately former residence. She wondered, for a moment, whether it indicated any special event—could it be that just where her own wedding breakfast might have been expected to take place, other and happier persons were now tasting the fruit denied to her? Then she turned her head away, remembering only it was there her brother had died.

But when she was passing the part of the beach which was to her the one place in the whole world in which she had known the greatest possible human happiness, in order, as she supposed, that she might subsequently know what was to her the worst extreme of human pain, she could not help casting a single desperate look that way; and instantly she stopped, and with such abruptness, that her father complained querulously—

"Constance, you hurt me." But she only murmured in reply—and more to herself than to him,

"What does that crowd mean?"

Precisely in that little spot down by the sea, where Kit had first confessed to himself his love for her; where he had spoken so cruelly to her while thinking only of her father, and her sudden change of fortune; where they had at last looked into one another's eyes, as only two such true, passionate, and loving souls can look when they first meet stripped of all the world's conventionalities—precisely there, where life seemed for her to make quite a leap upwards, and place itself thenceforward nearer by infinite degrees to heaven and to God,—there she saw now a group in a kind of rude circle, gazing on some object inside lying on the shingle.

"Father, sit down here on this stone; I will not be gone above a minute." And without waiting his consent, she placed him safely on the stone, and hurried downward toward the place. She was sorry she had gone. It was the dead body of a seaman that had been found floating among the breakers just off the shore; and been brought in and placed in that spot, so dear,

and yet so perilous to Constance. She shuddered, and went back, saying,

"Death — death — everywhere! — within and without! Not even that spot sacred to him!" And that was all. And then the two travellers resumed their journey.

## CHAPTER V.

### COUNTING THE MILE-STONES.

"THERE, father, see; another mile-stone! Only three more now."

The old man looked on her earnestly, and smiled. Strange to say that smile brought the first tear for many a long day into the woman's eyes. It was so sweet, so unusual from him. But when he said,

"Do let me sit down on the grass, I am so weary," the two facts coming together, at once confounded and frightened her.

"Yes, yes; we will sit down;" and then, with all her old tenderness coming back, let loose by his smile as if it had been so much frozen ice, she let him down gently upon the green and sloping bank; and fetched him some water in a little horn vessel that she drew from her pocket,

and made him drink it; and then she persuaded him to eat some fragments of soft biscuit, though he kept on saying he didn't want it, and she did. And then she began to try to lighten his spirits.

"You know, father, I didn't think we ought to go back to Aberford, but then it wasn't that I doubted the kindness or respect of the people——"

"No, no, I know that," chimed in feebly the old man.

"And as we are nearly there now, we will make the best of it."

"Yes, yes; that's right. Perhaps I may get into a nice shop again, and then my wonderful adventures, you know, will help us very much. I don't like to say it, but do you know that that dreadful fire turned out very useful to the business. It was much better after—O, very much!" And the poor old man began to rub his thin hands. But presently he sighed, and was a long time silent. And then again he smiled, as he happened to meet Constance's eyes; and she was sure it was a smile different from any she had ever known. What could it be? what could it mean?

The heart of the "little poplar" began once more to beat to new emotions, but she sternly put a stop to them, by abruptly rising up, and saying,

"Come, father, let us go."

"Yes, yes; but mind the right way—the lower road, not the upper one: past the plague-stone."

Constance sighed over this extraordinary perversity that would insist on going to every one of the places that her instinct taught her he ought to shun; but she had long ceased to oppose him in little things, while managing to compel obedience in matters of greater import.

But the old man found it hard work to go on. He constantly stopped; though generally he did so under some kind of excuse, and with some kind of apology, that inexpressibly touched the poor woman's heart. And then seeing how like a child he had become, she wooed him on as she remembered herself to have been once wooed on by her mother when she was a child on a day of long travel. Every object in advance she made the subject of a little doubt, or pleasant hypothesis, or statement of interesting facts as to

their journey, so as to get him to want to reach it, and then to reach the next, and so on.

"See, father," she once said; "from that milestone you can see the bridge across the Shene; and from the bridge you can see the plague-stone; and from the top of the plague-stone, where you once put me to frighten me, you can easily see the tops of the Grammar School, in the High Street. Don't you wish we could take great leaps—one, two, three, and be in Aberford? Well, we can't do that; but when you are sitting in Aberford, as you will be soon, drinking a nice cup of tea, you'll have done just as well by walking like this as if you had had the boots you once told me of in the fairy tale."

The old man laughed; and as in so doing he seemed better able to collect his thoughts and understand what he had laughed at, he laughed again.

"You see, father, we've only to think of it in one way, and to do it in another, to get over the ground capitally."

"Think one way—do another? Yes—yes—

yes—that's it; that's it. But we must brush up a bit, musn't we, soon?" And he began to look dubiously at his dusty black clothes and patched boots.

"O yes, when we get nearer. Why, father, you go so fast, that you don't heed the mile-stones now. There's the second behind you."

"So there is; wonderful!"

But in spite of Constance's ceaseless struggle with his weariness, and her no less ceaseless struggle with herself, to come out of herself and think only of him, act only for him, the way seemed to lengthen fearfully; and all the vivacity was passing once more away from her eye and heart, when they came suddenly upon the plague-stone. She had forgotten it. Not so, Mr. Chorley.

"There it is!" And the old man, moved by some impulse unknown to himself, took off his hat, where he stood, yet at a little distance; and his long thin silvery hair went streaming away in the wind, while he gazed with deep emotion and new strength mantling in his cheek, and illumining his eyes.

They went, slowly, just a little nearer; then stopped at his admonitory touch. Then again nearer, and he murmured,

"Constance, do you know, did you ever ask, why this plague-stone was erected?"

It was a strange question, Constance thought, to come from him. Surely he must know its history better than herself.

"Yes, father," she replied. "Your little book said that when the plague in coming from the south passed through this neighbourhood ever so long ago, the house where it stayed was pulled down, and the stone put up by the monks in grateful recollection."

"Yes, yes; my book was quite right. Strange, wasn't it—the plague to stop just there."

"Why strange, father? It must have stopped somewhere."

But the old man's lips moved inarticulately in answer; some thought—or rather some feeling—moved him deeply. Constance was alarmed at this sudden speechlessness, and said,

"You don't feel worse, father?" Coming

close to him and listening for his words she gathered that he was troubling himself about the fact that the plague had stopped at the spot where his children once departed from him for ever; and she saw him look at her, and try to smile as he before smiled, but break down, in grief that was too feeble for many tears.

"Do you feel worse, father?" Constance repeated.

"No, no. Besides, I don't mind now. Perhaps we mayn't have to walk any more."

"What does he mean?" Constance vainly asked herself. But suddenly he set her thoughts going at a fearful rate by his next words.

"You think he'll come, don't you?"

"Who, father?"

"Why, Christopher Vallon, to be sure."

"Christopher Vallon, father?" The old man put his finger to his temple with a vacant look as he murmured in a low tone, believing perhaps he was only thinking.

"Didn't I tell her. No, I was afraid. I must now. Yes, I must." Then, seeking Con-

stance's face, he said, "O! don't you know—I wrote to Kit days and days ago, to tell him how poor we were; and how we were coming back to Aberford; and how he musn't think you guilty of the fire, for it was me. Yes," he said, excitedly, "I told him, and I never told anybody before; I told him for your sake, Constance. No—no—I don't mean that—I——." But there he stopped.

And then, before Constance could shape out any words in answer, she saw a great change come over her father's face, while his frame trembled visibly—and he said in accents of such anguish as she had never before heard from him—

"O God, I am dying. Hold me, let me down!"

She laid him on the grass, and knelt by his side, gazing yearningly into his face for some sign of recovery. And after a kind of convulsion her prayer seemed answered. Again he smiled, though very sadly; again he spoke, and now with renewed clearness of intellect.

"Constance, I—I'm afraid things haven't been altogether with me as they should have been."

"Look up, father! If you think so, ask God's forgiveness even now."

"Yes, yes, I will pray: I am praying. You too! O, Constance! if God will not listen to your prayers, what will become of me? But I always meant to change when things had got comfortable. I only waited for that. Why don't you pray?"

"Father, my whole soul is pleading for you with God."

"No, no, you cannot care for me."

"Father, it is as I have said."

"No, I have wronged you too much."

"Father, if you could but know how I forgive you—how in this black hour I love you."

"Ah, but it is because you do not know all."

"Father, no knowledge could change me."

"Constance," said the miserable man, trying to turn his head away from her before he spoke again, but as she would not let him, but followed his eye with her own fervent, yearning gaze, he dropped his eyelids while the unwilling words came forth in frightful clearness,

"It was I who—to rid myself of a moment's fear—a moment's danger connected with your strange journey—gave the agent the idea that you had intended, in a fit of passion, to burn down the house."

"It was cruel, father; it was wicked. But I forgive you, and ask you not to fear my love, but to vouchsafe to me in this last hour one word that may say you do truly love me."

"O Constance! Constance! life has left me only that—has brought me through all to that—and my greatest trouble now is, you can have no right to believe me."

Constance said nothing in answer, but lifted him up a little and drew him to her, with his head leaning on her breast, which was heaving with all the old childish, passionate yearnings; and he was no longer frightened of them or of her, but smiled on her even through all the despair that was fast growing upon him. But he seemed as though he would not give way to it. He seemed as though he could wrestle not with God's angel only as Jacob did, but with God

himself, as he held Constance, and seemed to make her, and her goodness and devotion, his bulwark against the Divine summons to judgment.

But his strength was failing fast. He leaned against her so heavily that she was forced back till she touched the plague-stone — the very plague-stone by which he had watched his children going forth alone into life that spring morning. The black clouds parted; the moonlight fell upon their faces; the wind rushed fiercely by, mingling the black and silver hair together; and still the two figures by the plague-stone were motionless. She was gazing down upon his face, not in fear—no, not in fear now, or hope—but in cold, despairing misery. To know she had his love at last, only to lose it there! This was death: she knew it—knew that in another minute she would be standing on the road, the only traveller left of all the *three*. She gathered him close in her arms, with a low, bitter, pleading cry, that said, plainer than any words, "Me too, God! me too! I, too, am weary! O, let my journey end!" Once more the form in her arms writhed and shivered,

and she saw the glassy, glittering eyes turn, gazing eastwards. Mechanically she let her own eyes follow them, and beheld, only a stone's throw off, figures moving across the black, wind-swept heath.

"Going—going away—leaving me here to die with my crime," said her father, gazing half-blinded on the two forms.

But Constance suddenly pressed him against her heart, closely, wildly, as if to stifle the cry which nature, long suppressed, sent forth to the foremost figure on the heath, that seemed not a human figure only to her, but, like the break of morning over the desolate, death-haunted road, a sudden star rising beyond all her black misery. It might have been taken for a group of sculptured stone on the dark roadside, so still and silent were they now, with both faces set towards the east, whence one saw Death approaching, and the other Life.

Presently her father said, in a kind of self-communing under-tone,

"They are coming back, thank God, they are coming back! She is but a child, and her heart

fails her at the thought of such a journey. But what is that to my journey? You know I ought soon to reach Heaven! Tell me—softly—do you think I shall get there? I mean now that it is certain she goes with me wherever I go. O, she won't leave me! I know her well. The bravest soul, and yet the timidest! Well, well, well! God will take care of her anyhow."

When Kit,—outstripping his less vigorous but scarcely less agitated father; knowing now, from Mr. Chorley's confession, the truth,—came close up to them, seeking with new love and reverence the long-married wife of his soul, one of the two forms on the grass was as senseless as the plague-stone by which they knelt; while the other, with her arms wrapped about the dead, still turned her face towards him, as one down in a deep pit of darkness and agony might yet lift her face, transfigured at once by love and sorrow, towards the sky.

END OF THE PLAGUE-STONE OF ABERFORD.

# SIX P.M.

"So you've got over your Plague-Stone, sir," said I as I came into the squire's room, after listening outside the door a minute and finding all was still.

Mr. James lifted his quiet dark eyes and looked, not *at* me, but *beyond,* to see if Lawyer Ferrers was in my rear, I suppose; but Lawyer Ferrers wasn't in my rear; so Mr. James turned his eyes on his brother again.

"Yes, Matthew," he said, "we have finished, but this young fellow has actually written on both sides of the paper, so that the story was as long again as we expected, and I'm afraid the squire has been terribly bored."

I went to the bedside, held back the heavy blue curtain, and looked at Martin. I must

say I felt when I looked at him that if he had been left to spend those six hours after the manner he had been spending the last five or ten minutes since the story was finished, those far-away relations of old Squire Pole's would have been the richer.

His eyes were on the clock, and were looking heavy and hot, and I could see the vein in his white temple throbbing violently. When he saw me he said—

"Is Ferrers here?"

I told him that I had had to wait about all the afternoon for Mr. Ferrers, but that he would be here directly.

"Then give me a piece of paper and a pencil, James," he said.

While he lay scribbling a sheet full of notes and directions for the lawyer, I took up a book that Mr. James had given him to amuse himself with when the story was over. If it had been almost any other book than that I mightn't have guessed whether Mr. James had done a wise thing or not in putting it into his hands at such

a time. But this one I knew well. It was a big book, big as a family bible,—a local history, they called it; and as such reading was in my way, I got hold of it once while the squire was alive, and read out of it all about the country, and castles, and churches, and old families for miles round. When I took it off his bed that evening, in an instant I remembered the picture of an old tower where the book lay open, and looked at Mr. James. This old tower was called "Cook's Folly," and there was a story about its having been built for a young man threatened, like Martin, with some dreadful end by a certain time. They kept the lad there safe, so the story runs, till the very last day of the time; but then, at evening, just as his friends were going to make merry over him, all through forgetting one precaution, death came, and the prophecy was brought to pass.

This was a pretty page to engage Martin's thoughts on, wasn't it?

If I had looked at Mr. James's wise head just then I know where the book would very likely

have gone to; but I took care to keep my eyes in another direction, and put it down quietly without saying anything.

At that instant there was a slight noise outside the window: it might have been nothing but a bird among the leaves; but Martin started up, and drops of moisture came out on his forehead.

I felt I must find something to take his mind up instantly. Lawyer Ferrers hadn't kept his word; he had said he would be at the Manor-house as soon as I was; but knowing what a gormandiser he was, I had my fears when I heard that dinner was going on the table in half-an-hour.

There came a knock at the door. There he is, I thought. Mr. James got to the door before me, and looked as disappointed as I did to see our old housekeeper, Mistress Sicklemore, instead of Mr. Ferrers.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. James," she whispered, "but the man has just come to say that Mr. Ferrers is sorry, but he is unavoidably

detained on important business for about an hour."

His dinner, of course! I could have wished it might "unavoidably" choke him, only it was better to have him late than never, as circumstances were, and I dare say Mr. James agreed with me.

"Come here, Mistress Sicklemore," I said; "come here, there's a good soul; there, sit down in that chair, knitting, and see if you can't remember one of those old tales of yours that makes a body's hair stand on end. The thief in the wine-hamper, you know, that was conveyed into my Lord Ullerton's cellar by midnight,—or the poachers at Mayden Park. Come," I whispered, "you must tell us one of them this instant; we must keep him amused for an hour."

She sat in the arm-chair where I had pushed her, and looked at us all three through her spectacles, and she soon saw how things were.

"Matthew is going mad, sir, I believe," she

said, getting up and curtseying to Mr. James. "I never told a tale in my life."

"No, no, Mistress Sicklemore," said I; "I know that; but never mind; I want you to sit there and try. If you can't speak a word, never mind; you're a sight that's good for sore eyes, you know you are."

And so she was, as sound and fair and buxom an old lady as ever lived. We were great friends too; she and I had been school-fellows together, at Johnnie Cotterel's, on the moor.

"That's all very fine, Matthew," she said, looking from the bed to Mr. James, full of feeling for him; "that's all very fine, but I see as well as you do that something must be thought of to rouse him." Then she came to where I stood, and gave me a little thump in the chest, as she used to do when I took her bread and butter away at Johnnie Cotterel's—and said,

"Matthew, tell a story yourself this instant now; I insist upon it."

Me! yes, very likely I should take upon myself to open my mouth in story-telling to young Mr.

Martin Pole, who, when he was ever such a little boy, was so concerned for my ignorance, he would run after me till his legs ached, trying to teach me the rights and wrongs of grammar and the 'ologies.

"No, no, Mistress Sicklemore," I said; "no, no. Where should I get stories from?"

"*Where*, Matthew!" She looked at me with steady, sorrowful eyes that seemed to carry me back into years too long gone for any in that room, save ourselves, to remember. And while she looked at me with the tears coming in her dim blue eyes, and while she said, "*Where*, Matthew!" I forgot that I was sitting in Martin Pole's bedroom, and it seemed to me that I was in a full little churchyard far away; the bells were ringing; the people were going into church; but every face was strange to me, and yet I felt I had known all the faces which filled that church once, only it seemed as if that must have been in another lifetime, hundreds of years ago; and I thought I took up a handful of dust and looked into it, and face after face came rising before me,

and figure after figure, that I had known, but had forgotten; and then, almost before I knew what I was doing, I had said, under my breath,

"Ay, I can tell you a story, Mr. Martin."

And he said, with a sigh, and another look at the clock,

"I should like to hear it: begin."

# OLD MATTHEW'S PUZZLE.

## CHAPTER I.

### STIRRING THE DUST.

BEGIN! Lord bless me, Sir, if it doesn't set one's flesh creeping to go hunting up the dead out of the churchyard yonder; for that's what it seems like, when I try to bring to my mind all the people that were the pieces of my Puzzle—(I always called this tale my Puzzle). Yes, I see them rising up there, like ghosts, between me and the fire. There's broad-shouldered Stephen Trew, with his honest blue eyes. You couldn't look in Stephen's eyes and tell a lie. Ay, and there's Susanna in her bride's dress, all white and silver, holding up her bleeding hand; and there's good

old Mr. Gledstyne, with his white hair and ruddy cheeks.

Then there's Gales—he was landlord at the "Pole Arms" before Langley. What's become of his big body, that seemed made on purpose to bend to the great folks? Ay, but old Gales had an oily tongue—a tongue that knew how to talk the last shilling out of a poor man's pocket better than any tongue going. But, steady! they're coming up from the dust faster than I want them. What have I to do with Gales? No, no; rest where you are, Gales! you've had your share out of us, and the worms are having theirs out of you now. Old Death makes everything even. Not yet, Susanna! I don't want you yet. All in good time.

Now I've got all the pieces of my Puzzle ready, and I'm going to take them and put them together for you just as they came together in real life. Let's see: how far must I go back? But first, Mistress Sicklemore, try and call to mind a few of the things that happened before the Puzzle began.

You remember Mr. Gledstyne's French wife had an English maid—a Roman Catholic like herself—who, a week after her mistress's wedding, married David Trew. Well, it was about a year afterwards that I first went up as an under-gardener at the Hall, and I do say it was a sin and a shame to see that Martha Trew always away from her home dangling after Mistress Gledstyne in the way she did. Bless you, they used to sit out in the garden with their babies, gossip-gossip, as if they'd been born sisters instead of mistress and maid. They were always talking about their children being so wonderfully alike, though for my part I never could see any difference in babies born within a fortnight of each other.

Then, you know, came the quarrels between Mr. Gledstyne and his wife as to what the boy was to be—Roman Catholic, as his mother insisted on having him; or Protestant, which Mr. Gledstyne declared he should be. Well, presently everything of that kind is forgotten for something more serious. A message comes to

Mistress Gledstyne from her sister, who was the wife of some great body—a Consul or something, in the West Indies—begging her to go over to her directly, as she was dangerously ill. Yes, yes, Mistress Sicklemore; I'm quite aware, my good lady, you knew all this before. But wait a bit, maybe you'll find presently there was something going on in an under way like, which, begging your pardon ma'am, you were not quite up to. Well, Mistress Gledstyne sets off by vessel from London, and, after a deal of trouble with Mr. Gledstyne, takes the boy with her. Martha Trew goes with them as far as Plymouth, and takes her boy too. Well, well; you also remember the news coming a few days afterwards about the ship going down in the Channel, with only some half-dozen saved—four men, and a woman and her baby; and this woman was Martha Trew.

Well, as you know, there was a wonderful change in Martha after that. She never seemed to think of dress and pleasure now, but spent all her time and thought on her boy, and behaved

much better to old Trew than ever she had before. It made him feel thankful and yet worried; for it went to his heart to hear her speak so weak and timid—she that used to have such a pert, out-and-out manner—and to see her getting more thin, and white, and scared-looking, every day. But the way she brought up that boy Stephen was a pattern to every mother in the village. Yet it always seemed to me, you know, that she wanted too much of the boy. A scholar he must be—and the best workman in the village. Sometimes she seemed quite to break down like, between the two; and, one day—mark, for here comes in the first bit of the Puzzle—one day, after she had been scolding him for not knowing his lessons, she said, looking into the fire in a dreamy kind of way,

"Poor boy! It's hard—it's very hard, to make him fit for both; and yet——"

There she caught my eye upon her, and coloured up, and turned white again, in a way that set me thinking over her words as I should never have done else.

That was the first bit of the Puzzle that got into my head. Stephen was then twelve years old, and it was ten years more before I came upon the next bit. Yet all that time I could never meet Martha's suspicious eye without thinking of the change that had come over her since she went to Plymouth with Mistress Gledstyne. Yes, it was ten years before I came upon the next bit of my Puzzle, or rather the next two bits, for I had them both in my head at once, and they were—what should you think?—why, an old workshop and a pretty woman!

## CHAPTER II.

### SUSANNA.

WELL, I think we'll take a jump over that ten years; just remembering what passed. Let's see what had passed by the time Stephen was twenty-two.

First of all, he had served his apprenticeship at Pringley's the carpenter's, and came out the first workman in the place. Martha wouldn't let him be apprenticed till Mr. Gledstyne advised her. I noticed that too. In the next place, old Trew had gone off in a fit, and poor Martha got more and more nervous and ailing every day, and at last couldn't move from her chair in the chimney corner. What the poor soul would have done without Susanna the niece, whom she had taken when her mother died, I don't know. Next thing, Master Stephen must go falling over

head and ears in love with this Susanna. At first she only played fast and loose with him, as she did with all the chaps who were fools enough to have anything to do with her.

She was reckoned a beauty though, in our day; but she was always too much like a fine white cat to please me. She'd a nice figure enough though, straight and lissome, and a neat-turned ancle; yes she had. I can see her now as she used to walk down the village past the works when she thought Pringley's men were looking after her. She stepped like a dancer, in her thin light boots. You never heard her coming,—she'd glide up to you like a cat. She used to wear a violet-coloured shawl to show off her fair complexion. That's the one fault I could never forget. She was too fair—much too fair. Her eyes were good—clear pale blue; but her eyelashes and brows were so light that it almost seemed as if she had none. Her low, straight forehead was so white, that you could see the little blue veins in her temple; and when she was upset those veins would swell till they were dark

purple. There wasn't a bit of real colour in her face, except her lips, which were so thin that they only looked like a straight line of blood between her nose and chin. She had light tawny-coloured hair turned off her face in Mistress Gledstyne's style, and little round curls like rings plastered on her cheeks. She wore a bonnet open at the ears to show off the long gold ear-rings which Mistress Gledstyne gave Martha, and a little black-spotted veil pinned close over her face. She used to lay her arms one over the other in front of her, so as to show the white hands with long-pointed fingers, such as ladies have; and she had a way always of looking round sideways out of the corners of her eyes, as if she fancied she was being watched or followed.

Well, as I said, at first Susanna treated Stephen in the same way she treated scores of others whose heads were turned by her tiger-lily hair and pale eyes: but by and by she turns over quite a fresh leaf; becomes kindness itself to Martha; is never seen walking out with any one but Stephen; and seems bent heart and soul on

pleasing him: making him think her a perfect angel.

And now as to these next pieces of my Puzzle. One evening I had dropped in to see how poor Martha was. I was sitting in the chimney opposite to her, and Susanna was at the window watering the flowers. All of a sudden she set down the can, and called out—

"Aunt! aunt! There's a fire in Tanfield! Good gracious! it must be Stephen's workshop. Yes, that it is!"

Martha turned sharply round, and I stared as if I'd seen a ghost when I saw her rise straight up, and, holding on by the table, walk to the window. The fire flamed out bright and high—then sunk—and we saw through the smoke that the little workshop had not been touched; it was only the hayrick beside it had caught fire. Martha seemed to lose her new strength with her fright; she slid down on her knees and muttered to herself—

"My God! if it had been! O, if it had been! If I could never have righted him!

O, I thought it was a judgment on me for my delay."

I went home. I turned my first bit of the Puzzle over and over, but couldn't fit it with this, though it seemed somehow to belong to it. Then I couldn't help mixing Susanna up with it all. Her sudden change to Stephen—her strange look at Martha when the rick was on fire—so ran in my head that I said, to myself, I shouldn't be surprised but what Susanna turns out a very important piece of the Puzzle. So from that time I kept my eye upon her pretty closely, I can tell you.

## CHAPTER III.

### STEPHEN'S PICTURE IN THE FIRE.

ONE day, when Stephen came in to his tea, the little room was filled with neighbours, and there was a smell of doctor's stuff—so that he wasn't much surprised when he saw the poor thin figure stretched on the settle; and he went and stood at her feet, and a strange pain shot through him as he looked at the pale face and staring eyes, that seemed to see something awful in the white-washed wall. Susanna was leaning close over her. Stephen pushed her aside, and turned to the neighbours and said—

"Thanks for your help, neighbours! but I'm at home now, so it won't be needed any more; and what she's got to say now is for her own kith and kin to hear, and nobody else."

So one by one they dropped out.

Stephen took his mother's hand; it was so cold and damp that the touch made him shiver. She still kept staring at the wall in that dreadful vacant way, and presently she said, in a hollow voice—

"Ask her what it is she's wanting of me. Haven't I done all I can—now that it is so late? O, Steenie, Steenie! tell her to keep her heavy wet hands off me!"

Then she cowered low—her head on Stephen's arm, and lay still, looking at something beyond him.

Stephen looked over his shoulder, and was surprised to see Susanna standing there; he thought he was alone with his mother. After a little while he said to her—

"She's asleep; go up to bed, Susanna; I'll watch."

"Are you sure she's asleep, Stephen?" says Susanna; "I think I'll wait a bit longer;" and she sat down close by Martha.

Stephen went and stood by the fire; Martha's words had made him anxious for her. It was

plain that what the neighbours whispered about her having something on her mind must be true, and he wished Susanna would go away and leave them alone.

Presently Martha started up on her elbow, and said, in the same strange, hollow voice,

"Don't curse me! O, Sir, haven't I brought him up almost as well as you could have done? But why should he ever know? Susanna! Susanna! don't go yet! Why should he ever know?"

Then she put both her hands to her head, and muttered,

"Ay! but that letter: that letter and that hair! I dare not burn them. Yet, why shouldn't I? Who's to know, unless the sea can give up its dead?"

Stephen looked up and met Susanna's eye, that was fixed on him in a strange, uneasy way, and she said,

"Why cannot I watch, Stephen? It's not so bad for me to hear her raving like this as it is for you. Poor thing! it's all coming back to her

about her young days, and the sweetheart that was drowned at sea."

"No, Susanna; I would rather you left us alone. You had best go to bed," Stephen said, in a determined sort of way. He didn't care about having his mother's troubles spoken of so before her—even by Susanna.

Susanna moved about, smoothing the pillows and drawing the window curtains, and doing half a dozen more little things that she seemed double the time over she need have been. At last, after Stephen had spoken to her again, she took her candle and went upstairs. Again did Stephen sit down by the fire, and he found himself listening heart and soul for his mother's next words. Martha was sitting up, rocking to and fro as if quieting a child. Presently she laid her hand on her forehead, and said, looking round at Stephen,

"Who was it said my boy was sick—dying? Look at him—see him on his feet! Does he look sick, David Trew—or dying, think you?"

Now, all this time Stephen sat looking into the

fire. He saw a picture there. At first it was all dim and smoky, and the figures were huddled together; but by and by, as Martha still went on in her light-headed, rambling way, his picture cleared, and cleared, till at last he got so intent upon it, that he rose up from his chair and stood staring at it, with his heart beating as if it would burst.

Once he went to the window, and looked at the fir plantations round the Hall, lying black on the side of the hill under the moon. Then he looked at his scarred, hard-worked hands, and then at the thin figure on the settle—and his heart was very bitter against her.

Soon Martha raised herself up a bit, and stared round the room, and said,

"Has he been told yet? Will he come? O Stephen, my boy, my boy! You won't curse me if he should come. I have been all that a mother could be to you, haven't I?"

He couldn't answer her—he couldn't speak; there was such a choking in his throat.

"Steenie," Martha said, in her own, natural

voice, only very faint—"Steenie, come to me! I want to tell you a story."

Stephen went and stood by her, and a pain shot through him as he felt he was watching her dull eyes and white face—in such wild fear, not of losing his mother, but only of losing what she had to tell him. Yes, that's all he thought of at that minute, as he saw her trying to speak with her last breath; and that made him, when he found she couldn't, grip hold of her arm and say, in a voice low and hoarse, and shaking with passion,

"Mother! mother! Don't leave me like this! Before God, *are* you my mother?"

She did not breathe; yet still he gripped her arm and bent over her, and fixed his eyes on her face as if he would keep her against death—against anything, till she answered him. And the minutes went by without either moving a muscle. The white face grew drawn and fixed, and the tears that had come into the eyes when Stephen cried out so fiercely to know the truth, seemed to freeze there. At last he dropped the

arm—and the clenched hand fell with a dead, heavy knock on the floor.

Martha Trew was dead!

Stephen knew it; and, in his madness at being shut out of the secret for ever, he could have shouted to the poor weary spirit that was turning to its rest, to come back and give him justice and amends. But by and by, as he kept looking at her with bitterness in his heart, his great loss came slowly and heavily over him, crushing every other feeling. He didn't move, but stood looking at the drawn mouth that had kissed him, and sang to him, and taught him, and the bony hand that had striven and worked for him—and two hot tears came rolling down his cheeks.

He forgot all about his picture now, and everything else in the world but his great loss. He was Martha's boy again, and she was his mother—his own mother; and she lay there dead! and a trouble was on her soul! He knelt down and kissed the grey hair on the pillow, and cried over it; and he buried his face in her breast, and stretched his arms over her, and clung about her

as helpless as when he was a little child, looking up to her and saying, "Mother, take me!"

But Stephen was strong; and, though human nature will be human nature, he soon got the master-hand over his passion, and held it down like; and folding his hands together, and shutting his eyes to get into the darkness where she was, he tried to fancy himself by her side before the Judge, and he said—

"Master, take the burden from the weak workman, and lay it on the strong—take her debts from her, and make me debtor of them."

Poor Stephen, he little knew how fearfully all her wrong-doing *would* be visited on him in days to come.

When he got up from his knees the candle had burnt out, and the room was pitch-dark; so he stretched himself on the floor by the settle, and drew a corner down of the old shawl she was wrapped in, and laid his forehead on it; and the two slept side by side—the living and the dead.

Ah, Martha Trew! you didn't deserve to look back on the lad you had wronged so, and find

him taking more comfort in a bit of the shawl your dead body's wrapped in than in the whole world. No, you didn't deserve it, if you did slave and toil, and give your soul for him.

So she was dead! Was the secret dead too? Dead, to go to dust with her heart—dead, never again to unsettle him it concerned? Ay, that's what I asked myself when I heard all this. Was it so? or had it passed from her to another? Did it still live in a living heart—and whose?

You shall hear.

## CHAPTER IV.

### STEPHEN WRITES A FEW WORDS IN HIS MOTHER'S BIBLE.

STEPHEN, you remember, gave up Martha's cottage to Susanna, and came to live with me at the Lodge belonging to the Hall. Now, we were the two worst ones in the world to live together and have secrets from one another; so it wasn't long before he told me all I've just told you. And we talked over the Puzzle together often,—and very quiet and keen Stephen was about it, never letting himself hope too much, and yet not shutting his eyes to anything, except when we happened to turn the light on Susanna,—that he always put a stop to instantly.

Well; one Sunday night, when Stephen came in from one of his moonlight walks with Susanna, I thought he seemed a good deal excited, and

asked him what was the matter? "Matter! Nothing—what should be the matter?" he said tartly, and then sat down by the window and leant his head on his arm. But Stephen would sooner cut off his right hand—and he'd have cut off a good business with it, mind you—than he'd let a lie get an hour old, if one passed his lips; so in a minute or two he looks up and says—

"What do you think I've been doing this Sunday evening, Matthew? I've been taking an oath on my mother's Bible, and I've written the oath under her name."

He said it in a cool desperate kind of way, as much as to say—"It was wrong; but it's done now, and it's no good your bothering about it."

"Taking an oath, Stephen!" I said; "then it's to be hoped it's one you'll never repent, for you'd follow it if it led you to ruin."

"Yes, I'll keep it," said Stephen, quietly and firmly. Then he laughed and said, as he took up his candle,—

"It won't be so very difficult to keep though, and it won't lead to ruin exactly."

"You have sworn to marry Susanna! Isn't that it, Stephen?" I said.

He just nodded,—and I saw his hand shake as he lit his candle by mine.

"Stephen," I said, looking hard at him by the light of both, "you didn't do that coolly, and of your own free will."

"I should hope I did though," said he, with a forced kind of laugh.

"Then I'm very sorry it's happened, Stephen Trew," I said; and I said it from my heart.

He didn't fly out at me as I expected, and as he always did when I said anything against Susanna, but stood still, kicking at a hole in my carpet with his heel.

"How was it?" I asked him at last, for he seemed to want to speak.

"Oh, she vexed me with keeping on so about my casting her off if I happened to get a bit higher in the world."

"Indeed," thinks I, "cunning as usual, Miss Susanna." "Well, Stephen?"

"At last," said Stephen, "after I had sworn

over and over again that nothing 'ud ever make me change, she held up the Bible and said, half laughing, 'I dare you to write your oath in this, Stephen!' At first I didn't like to; but she in a way taunted me into it,—so I took out my measuring-pencil, and it was done before I gave it a second thought."

"What did you write, Stephen?" I asked him.

"I wrote what she told me," said he—"*I, Stephen Trew, swear by this book, that, come what may, I do consider Susanna Ford my affianced wife.*"

"And she told you to write just that?"

Again he nodded.

"Stephen!" I said, dashing my pipe to pieces under the grate, "that woman's an artful, scheming witch! Take my word for it there's something at the bottom of her fine doubts and misgivings. There's some secret in her hands, which, if I were you, I'd shake out of her somehow or other. Why, you can't be blind to it, man? It's as clear as daylight."

Stephen turned full on me, and brought his hand down heavily on my shoulder.

"Matthew Mucklethrift," says he, a little hoarsely, "if you speak another word against her, I shall be forgetting you're an old man, and ——But I'll say no more about it now, only this—remember, whatever happens, I look on her as my wife, and whoever insults her insults me. You know what I've done—you know I can't draw back. Let's hear no more about it. Here's my hand, Matthew; you're my best friend, and I shouldn't like this to part us,—only, don't say a word more against her."

We shook hands, but from that time I worked at the Puzzle alone.

## CHAPTER V.

### SUSANNA'S WEDDING FEAST.

WELL; the wedding-day came round. It was New Year's eve—and a black New Year's eve it was too. When I opened the Lodge door before it was quite light in the morning, the first thing I saw was a single crow flying over from the trees behind Susanna's cottage to the Hall. It stopped in front for an instant, and clapped its great black wings; then perched on the gable just over Mr. Gledstyne's bedroom window. I shook my head as I saw it, and watched Stephen go off in his fine clothes. He made me promise I'd hobble down to the village to see the dancing, if my rheumatism would let me.

Well; about seven in the evening I went. They'd got the old room where Martha died done up in grand style. Tommy Grimes stood up on

the settle fiddling away for his life; and the girls were all dressed out in their best, and chattering —lor! you could scarcely hear a squeak of Tommy's fiddle.

Presently came Susanna gliding down the room to speak to me. I looked at her from head to foot. I looked at her well; and if ever a woman looked like an angel from the wrong place Stephen's bride did, as she tried to stare me out with those pale blue eyes of hers. Now, you could see that Susanna had determined not to dress like a common village girl; but for once in her life she had overstepped her mark, for she was dressed more like a stage princess than a lady. She had made herself a dress out of a grand thing that Martha once showed me, and told me had been a Court-dress of Mistress Gledstyne's. It had broad silver stripes down it; and as Susanna went sliding and gliding, and twisting and turning, in the dance, she looked more than ever like a splendid white woman-snake—all glitter, and shine, and softness. Her shoulders quite dazzled one as her veil flew back; and as

the others got hot and red, she seemed to grow colder and whiter, and more light of foot, every minute.

As for Stephen, he was always fond of dancing; but to-night he was as if he couldn't stop still an instant. At last, after he had danced with every girl in the room, and frightened two or three old bodies out of their wits by catching 'em up and whirling 'em round till they didn't know whether they stood on their heads or their feet, he came and sat down by me, near the door. I could see that his eyes, like mine, followed the silver stripes and fluttering veil in and out among the gaudy dresses. Perhaps he noticed, as well as me, that there was something odd and unusual in Susanna's manner that night. Though she danced with anybody that asked her, she somehow didn't seem like one of the rest, but held her head up, and gave her hand gingerly, like a grand lady who had just stepped down from her drawing-room to please the poor people by mixing a few minutes in the dance.

Well, they were all tearing about like mad, and

dancing too hard for any chattering to go on the while, and Tommy's fiddle sounded bravely, when the door opened, and Mr. Gledstyne's man John put his head in.

"Why, that's a long face to come to a wedding feast with, John," says I. "What's the matter?"

"Matthew," says he, "you're wanted directly; Master's fell from his horse and broke his leg! The Doctor doesn't think he'll get over it. He said he should like to see all his servants, and had us up. You're the only one that was away, and he's sent me to fetch you."

I told him I'd be after him directly; and as I turned to ask Stephen to get my stick from the chimney corner, I found the silver stripes quite close to me; and looking up, I could see Susanna had heard something that had interested her.

When Stephen came with my stick, he whispered, "Say good night to Susanna, and wish her well."

I turned round to where she had stood half a minute ago, between me and the open door, and she was gone. Pass me she certainly never had;

no, she had gone out, bitterly cold as it was, in her thin wedding-clothes.

But Stephen laughed, and looked all round the room before he would believe it. When he couldn't doubt it any more, he came to me and said, with a troubled, suspicious face,

"Matthew, tell me—did she hear about Mr. Gledstyne?"

I told him I thought by the look of her face she had heard.

"Then where do you think she is gone?" he asked in a whisper.

I thought of the second bit of my Puzzle, and said,

"The workshop! Take my advice, Stephen, get there by the nearest cut, and watch round it." And I went my way up to the Hall, leaving him to do as he chose. Well, as I want to tell you just how things worked round, I must tell you about him first.

He went. It was a strange night—one minute pitch-dark, and another clear moonlight. With a sick feeling at his heart, he took the key from

where it hung just inside the little window, jerked it round in the rusty lock, and shutting the door, hung the key back in its place. Then he stood, not knowing what to do—leaning his back against the door, and asking himself if he wasn't a fool for taking such strange advice.

By and by, as he stood there with his eyes fixed upon the ground, it struck him all at once that there were two kinds of light flickering over it. Yes, Mistress Sicklemore, you may well look behind you, for it's a queer bit I'm coming to now. Well, suddenly lifting his eyes to see where the other light came from, Stephen saw something that made him clutch the bench with his fingers, and turned his face to the colour of death.

There, at the little window with the one broken pane, moving slowly up and down on the right-hand side—as if feeling for the key—was a hand —a woman's hand—thin and long, and of a bluish white, with a light red from a lantern shining through at the nails. The wrist didn't move, because of the thin sharp points of glass

that stuck up all round, but kept still, while the fingers felt about. Presently, the arm was pushed in nearly to the elbow, and the light outside was raised a little.

A horrible feeling came over Stephen as he was obliged to own that he knew that white hand—that he had touched it—that those horrid, creeping, feeling fingers had been tangled in his hair; that that ring shining round one of them had been placed there by him, with vows that put his whole fate into that hateful hand. And mark! not only did Stephen know it as his bride's hand, but, as he watched it with loathing and fascinated eyes, he knew it to be the hand that for years had been tangling a kind of web about him so quietly and secretly, that he never knew it till he felt himself bound hand and foot. As he looked, and looked, he let out the breath that was stifling him in a quick sort of gasp. He was heard! The hand moved up with a sudden jerk, and caught in the longest point of jagged glass at the top. It *did* seem alive then. There was a little half-smothered scream that seemed to come from

it; and each nail seemed like a red eye glaring at Stephen. He laid hold of the bench and drew himself up stifly; but when he saw the blood dripping from the pointed tips of the fingers, his head reeled, and to save himself from falling he sank down close behind the door, so that if it opened he would be completely hidden—by it on one side, and the planks on the other. He kept his eyes on the window still; and, as he had felt sure it would after listening and hearing no sound, the hand returned, and this time succeeded in reaching the key. Then he heard a soft scrunching noise coming round the shed, like light feet on the snow—and got further behind the planks, that stood longways against the wall and a little apart, so that he could see through the cracks. Well, the key turns, and the door opens, and *she* comes in with a lantern in her hand. With a dreadful beating at his heart he saw the tall figure, shining in its satin and silver stripes, glide up to a corner and begin moving something from the wall. While she clutched and clutched at the brick, she once turned her

head in the old cautious way over her shoulder, and, without her knowing it, their eyes met. Stephen shut his with a shudder—then opened them, and fixed them upon her again.

After a few minutes more patient cat-like working she turned and glided out, with a smile on her face and something wrapped in a corner of her veil.

Stephen staggered out after her, and saw her turn in the direction of the Hall.

## CHAPTER VI.

### STEPHEN'S INHERITANCE.

WELL, when I got up to the Hall, after leaving Stephen, I found Mr. Gledstyne a good deal better. He was stretched on the sofa in the study. The Doctor had just left him, and I found him alone. I could see he was half distracted with pain, yet he tried so hard to speak in his old jolly way that it brought the tears in my eyes to hear him.

"Shan't be able to lead the dance to-night, Matthew," says he. "I'm sorry, for I haven't missed dancing at one of the last five weddings we've had—and——"

I didn't catch what else he said, for I was listening to a voice at the door—a voice I thought I knew by the way it hissed out every word, as if it were all esses.

"I tell you I must see Mr. Gledstyne!" says the voice.

"It's no good asking him," said Mr. Gledstyne's man John; "he's too bad to see anybody."

"I must see him! If he's dying I must see him!" says the voice, loud and distinct.

"What is it? What's the matter, John?" asks Mr. Gledstyne fretfully.

Then says the voice, in a long, low hiss—

"Tell him MISTRESS GLEDSTYNE wants to speak to him!"

Mr. Gledstyne gave a sort of cry, and started up, and, with his head stuck forward, stared towards the door. I, too, leant forward in my chair, and strained my eyes through the firelight. I heard no step coming, but I heard a soft rustling—and I knocked the end of the log into the hollow part of the fire, and so threw a bright red light upon the figure standing in the middle of the room. I hardly noticed at the time that her left hand was bleeding, through the veil it was wrapped in, all over her fine dress—

for my whole mind was taken up with the Puzzle, and with watching what she was going to do next—how she meant to prove her right to that name—which was all a mystery to me. She was now standing by Mr. Gledstyne's sofa, answering with a cool, impudent look his frightened gaze.

"What do you mean? What are you doing with my name?" he gasped out, livid with anger—for it had been a terrible shock to him; he had half expected to see his drowned wife, and he felt enraged beyond everything against this woman, who he thought had played a trick upon him for amusement.

Susanna kept her eyes on his in the same impudent way, as she said, with a half smile, but a shaky voice—

"It is my name, too, sir; and I have every right to it."

"What do you mean, woman? Speak!" he shouted, trembling in every limb.

"I mean, Mr. Gledstyne," said Susanna slowly, folding her arms and looking down upon him, still smiling, "that I am your son's wife."

"*My* son's!" he muttered. "Mad woman!"

"Yes, Mr. Gledstyne," says she, holding out a yellow-looking letter to him; "Stephen Trew is your own son, as this will show you."

Mr. Gledstyne took the letter in his shaking hand and read, while Susanna's eyes darted about, first on one grand piece of furniture, then on another, and then on his face, still with that strange smile of hers curling her thin lips. I've read it a good many times since then, and I think I've got the sense of it pretty well; and what I've forgot you won't miss. Let's see: how did it begin?—ay, ay, I've got it now:—

"*On board the Reachland,*
*Wednesday Evening.*

"I am settled in the ship, Vernon, and Martha leaves me to-morrow. Yes, to-morrow I shall be alone. I am very miserable. I don't know why—for after all it is not much to cross this sea. I did not think it so when I crossed it with you—to go to your home and all that I am now leaving—and I cannot tell why I shudder at it now. Yet a fear has been over me ever since my foot

left the land that it would never touch it more. But I did not sit down to write to you of this, but our child. It shall be as you wish—Martha shall take him back to you to-morrow. Poor girl—now that she has lost hers, she clings more than ever to little Vernon. Say a kind word to her, will you not, and let her see him often?

"There then, I have promised; but how shall I—O, how shall I part with him—my darling? He is lying on my neck now, with one little hand twisted in my hair, and the other stroking my wet cheek. Perhaps he wonders why it is wet, as he looks up at me with those eyes of yours. He little thinks it is because when I have folded this I shall lay him in Martha's arms—perhaps never to take him back. Who can tell? How tightly he has twisted his hand about my hair. When Martha takes him, I will cut the piece off as he holds it, and he shall bring it to you in his hand; it will show you a little, perhaps, how he is twined about my heart, and how much of that—the best—will be dragged and torn away from this ship to the shore, as I see him there in Martha's

arms, and the miles growing and growing between us.

"I have taken the cross from his neck—you know what that means—and have bought him one of your Bibles—a very pretty one you see, with bright clasps, that he may take to it early. Try, Vernon, to realise what it is I give up to you, and think of me once more as you used.

"Martha has come, and my trial; and I have not said one-half that I wished to say. You will not forget to be kind to Martha.

"Farewell! Would that I had never begun this journey!

"AMY GLEDSTYNE."

As Mr. Gledstyne finished reading this letter, Susanna undid the rusty clasps of a Bible she took from her pocket, and opening it, showed a knot of hair. It was dark and tangled; you could fancy that the little stubborn baby's fist had only just let go of it. Mr. Gledstyne took the Bible, and looked down upon the hair, till a mist gathered over his eyes.

"Matthew," he said, with a trembling voice, "send for him; send for Stephen Trew."

So I went out and spoke to John, for I felt afraid somehow of leaving my poor master alone with that snake, Susanna, or I should have gone for Stephen myself, and prepared him for all. When I came back, Mr. Gledstyne was reading another worn letter; it was from that poor soul, Martha. I'll tell it you, as well as I can recollect:—

"By the time Stephen will have come to you with this and my mistress's letter, and it is made known to you what I have done, I shall have met her, my mistress, face to face, and she will have asked me about her last message. You will not know before then; because, after all, I have given your boy my life, my whole care; and how could I die any other to him than I have lived—his mother? I do not ask you to forgive me, Mr. Gledstyne; I cannot expect forgiveness; but I ask you to believe it was love for the boy made me do what I did, and that—that same love,

brought me my punishment. I have never known a day's peace since I took him home in my arms —clinging to me as if his life hung upon mine— and it wasn't nature to part us. Yes, my love was indeed my punishment. It grew and grew in me every day; but if at any time I would forget and give way to it, and try to fancy it my own, I seemed to see *her* standing between me and the child, looking through her wet hair, as she looked when her body rose in the waves that night, and to hear her saying—'He is mine, Martha Trew; he is mine!' and I've had to call up a hard word to my mouth, and to see the boy turning away from me afraid, with the tears in his eyes, when all the time I'd be longing to snatch him up in my arms. You'll remember that. Please—please remember that, Mr. Gledstyne, and don't be too hard on me, nor let him, my Steenie, be too hard on—it's a bitter word to write, but never mind; he'll never see her after he reads it—his nurse.

"MARTHA TREW."

"Well," said Mr. Gledstyne, when he had

read it, "and who did Martha trust this to—you?"

"Me!" said Susanna, boldly; "why I never dreamed of Stephen being anything but a poor working man till this very night, when I found these things in a chest of Aunt Martha's I never opened before. She might have meant to—I think she did—but she was light-headed some weeks before she died, and didn't know what she said. No, sir,"—(she went on drawing up her long figure till her shadow on the wall touched the ceiling)—"I should never have married Stephen if I had known."

While Susanna said this, I noticed that her lips grew white and her fingers twitched, as if she longed to snatch Martha's letter from Mr. Gledstyne's hands.

Just then the hounds set up a barking, and the Lodge-bell rang. Mr. Gledstyne looked at his son's wife, and pointing to the great doors of the drawing-room, said in a cold, polite, but hurried sort of way:

"Will you please to walk in there while I speak to Stephen? I hear he has come."

With another uneasy look at the letter, which Mr. Gledstyne noticed, she smiled and bent her head, and went into the great dark drawing-room, and closed the door after her, as Stephen was shown in at the other door. He stood there a minute with his cap in his hand, till Mr. Gledstyne said—

"Come here, Stephen!"

So he went and stood by him, and Mr. Gledstyne gave him his wife's letter, and watched him while he read it, with tears rolling down his cheeks into his white beard. It was the first time I had ever seen him so, and I made a fool of myself so that I couldn't see any more, till Stephen had placed the letter on the pillow and taken up the hair and laid it tenderly on the back of his hand, as if it were too silky and delicate to touch with his rough fingers. Then he laid that back on the letter—ay, the hand had brought the hair at last; but it had grown and roughened a bit on the journey.

Mr. Gledstyne took both of Stephen's hands in his, and looked up in his face, waiting to see the change come over it. But it never altered. Stephen seemed to shrink more and more into himself as he stood there—the workman still (for he couldn't throw off the old life all in a minute), looking at his coarse hands lying in Mr. Gledstyne's, and he felt ashamed.

Mr. Gledstyne looked anxious. No doubt it came across him: Was his son so much a carpenter that his heart had hardened to what he worked in, that he stood there like a block, so dull and stupid? He could not bear that—No! better to have never known he was his son. He let go his hands, and opened his arms wide, and said—

"My boy! my boy!"

There was a great cry from Stephen, hoarse and strong—and a heavy fall that shook the floor; and I stopped my ears. I don't know if it was right to have heard all I did; but I wouldn't hear any more. I saw Stephen's head

strained to his father's breast, with his cheek on his mother's hair and letter—and that was enough. I stopped my ears to shut out the two men's sobs.

"Are you there, Matthew?" Mr. Gledstyne said at last—his deep voice as faint and sweet as a woman's: "are you there? My boy says you have been a true friend to him. Come, stir up the fire, man, and let's have a look at him!"

And I did; but it was too bad for even he to look Stephen in the face just then.

"Yes," says he, as he put his hands on his broad shoulders, and held him off. "Yes, it's Amy's boy, sure enough. Ay, they've robbed us of each other all these years, but they couldn't do us much harm. I'm not a whit the less proud of you, my boy—no, not a whit, for your having been Stephen Trew!"

Mr. Gledstyne fell back, white as death.

"See if there's any brandy in there," said I to Stephen; "I'll go down and see if the Doctor's gone."

Susanna stood there as he opened the drawing-room door, but he rushed past taking no notice of her, and she came in and stood looking at Mr. Gledstyne in such a strange way that, hardly knowing what I was about, I touched Stephen's arm and pointed to a great looking-glass in the drawing-room opposite the open door, and in which we could see the corner of the study where Mr. Gledstyne lay. He was looking at the end of the last page of Martha's letter, and Susanna's fingers twitched and her eyes glared upon him, and she quietly went nearer and nearer to him, as he held up the leaf so as to see through it by the fire-light. Suddenly looking up, he found her close beside him.

"Liar!" he hissed out through his clenched teeth and ashy lips, "I have found you out. This line of writing that has been scratched and meddled with is—*'Susanna knows all! May she with God's blessing right those that I have wronged.'* Stephen! Stephen! I say."

I think Stephen would have fallen if it hadn't

been for my poor rheumatic arm. Still we could not move; our eyes seemed riveted on the glass by the strange, almost devilish smile on Susanna's face, as she stood looking down upon him.

"Have you found me out?" she said, in that low whisper of hers, that almost froze my blood to hear; "and will you tell Stephen? Will you? Will you? *Dare* you?"

"Stephen! Help!"

As we hurried in together Susanna passed us, gliding along with her cat-like step, and sat down in the old state chair by the fire in the drawing-room.

Mr. Gledstyne lay back upon the pillow—*dead!*

"Were we dreaming?" whispered Stephen, passing his hand over his clammy brow, "or did—did that horrible hand touch him? Look here, Matthew, look!"

He drew something from his father's clenched hand. Holding it up and spreading it out, we saw it was a corner of flimsy lace—a piece

of Susanna's veil. Now mind! I tell you, as I told Stephen at the time, I don't believe she meant to do more than stop him telling Stephen about those scratched-out lines, but stopping his breath for an instant, in the state he was in, was enough to stop it for ever. Stephen stood looking at it for full three minutes before he could take in the horrible truth. Then he strode to the drawing-room door, and stood looking round the room with his wild eyes and lips as white and as firm-set as the dead man's.

Susanna did not see him—she was standing with her back to us, looking up at the splendid pictures and mirrors which covered that side of the wall. Presently she spread her arms out, and said to herself, looking up and down the wall,

"Mine! mine! every thing—all mine!"

My heart misgave me as to what Stephen was going to do—he looked at her so fixedly and long. I knew how much greater his hate must be for having loved her so, and now I trembled for her,

tigress as she was. At last he went into the room, and, without taking any notice of Susanna, took hold of the bell-rope and pulled it violently without stopping till all the servants, who had heard something from John of what was going on, came hurrying to the door.

Susanna stared, half stupefied, wondering what he was going to do.

As Stephen stepped forward towards them, I saw two or three started as I did, to see how like he was just now—with his stern, pale face—to the portraits of the two last Squires hanging on the wall.

"You have heard what has passed to night—you know who I am, John?" he said; drawing himself up, as if he were proud of his inheritance, poor fellow!

"Yes, God bless you, sir," said the old butler, with tears in his eyes. "I know you're the master of this house—and we've all known you, sir, just as if you'd been brought up in it—and we wouldn't wish for a better master, seeing the Squire's took away from us."

And the women all curtsied to Stephen, but sent looks of dislike at Susanna, who stood drawn up in her fine dress, trying to look very grand and high, but trembling all the while to hear what he was going to say to them. A pink spot came on each cheek, and the little blue veins in her temples swelled as if they'd burst, when Stephen stretched out his arm and pointed at her, and said:

"Very well, then. That is my wife, the mistress of this house; and I command you to obey her every word—to wait upon her hand and foot. You know this is our wedding-night. Light the candles in the state bedroom—take her there and wait upon her. If I do not come in less than an hour, fetch me; I shall be in the study with my father—mind, I say—fetch me."

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE LADY OF GLEDSTYNE HALL.

Mistress Susanna Gledstyne stood looking at her fine figure, at full length, in a dressing-glass in the old state bedroom.

After making the women try on all the faded finery in the wardrobes, she had chosen to be dressed in a loose white gown of Indian muslin, and now she was arranging a large flower, made of jewels, in her tawny hair.

She stood looking at herself with a great flaming wax-light on each side the glass, waiting for the bridegroom to come—for the hour was passed.

Perhaps she was thinking of the family diamonds that Mr. Gledstyne's sister, Miss Mirabel, went to Court in, and wondering how soon they would be put into her hands. At any

rate, she was tired of walking through the old house, and ringing the bells to see how often the servants would answer to her call. She was tired of scribbling "Susanna Gledstyne" on the blank leaves of books on the drawing-room table—almost tired of looking at her own white face.

Suddenly, she hears footsteps coming up the stairs and along the passage. The outer door of the bedroom creaks, and two women come and draw aside the heavy curtains, and hold them back—and Mistress Gledstyne turns to meet the bridegroom. But first come two men bearing lights—who wait at the door and look back; then, more heavy, shuffling feet, and another two come in—carrying a man's body by the feet and arms. The blood is pouring from his side, and, just as he is, they lift him on the bed—the bridal bed.

We had gone to the study at the end of the hour. I had opened the door as quietly as I could, and saw Stephen kneeling by his father's side. He was looking at something he held in his hand. At first I didn't notice what (it was

one of the old pistols that were always kept loaded on the sideboard); but I was struck all of a heap like, by the sight of his face! Poor Stephen! Even at a time like that he bore the truth on his face; for if I hadn't seen the pistol, I could have told what he was meaning to do. At one instant, through the determined look, the face was sad and tender, as if he were giving a last thought to his father and his own mother, and her to whom he was related by a tie as strong as that of blood —poor Martha Trew. Then there seemed to come over him, like a flash, a thought of the greatness and happiness that might have been his; and his face grew so strange and fierce that I thought the time had come to save him from himself, and two of us rushed in. But as soon as he saw us he leapt to his feet, turned the pistol against his heart, and fired! I had knocked the pistol upwards a few inches as he fired, and the ball entered the shoulder. He gave a low moan, and fell fainting against the sofa; and, just as he was, we lifted him up and carried him in to Susanna.

By this time all sorts of wild stories had spread

over the village. Crowds had got round the house, and some of those who had been drinking hard at the wedding-feast, and had only got some muddled idea of Stephen's good luck, were shouting under the window and throwing up their caps—while poor women who had heard that Mr. Gledstyne was dead, cried and wrung their hands, and declared ruin must come upon them. The magistrate and the clergyman, and two or three more of Mr. Gledstyne's friends, came into the room where we were, and questioned us.

Mistress Gledstyne took no notice of anything but Stephen. She stood at the bedside, holding the curtain back with one hand, and her beautiful hair with the other; while the smile that she wore when she turned to meet the bridegroom seemed frozen on her face. For nearly five minutes she stood so. Then she put her foot on the steps, and set one knee on the bed, still smiling so awfully as she looked down upon him. Her eyes were like two cold, polished stones, and in the hollow of each a great tear lay glittering.

At last, as Stephen began to revive, you could

see sense coming slowly into her face, and her white lips moved with a piteous, weak kind of cry:

"Stephen! Stephen! What have you done?"

Stephen started up with a shrill scream—almost like a woman's scream it was—and drops of sweat came out thick on his forehead.

"O God!" he said, looking round, "she is here again! I thought I'd got away from her for ever. Help me! Help me! Look! she is going to kill me as she killed him!"

She was only stretching her clasped hands in a beseeching way towards him, but when she heard his last words, and saw him sink fainting on the pillow, she shrank back and slid from the bed. Stephen's words seemed to decide the magistrate, who had been hearing the servants' strange stories about her, and he signed to two of them to lock her in one of the rooms till he could learn more. There was something terrible in Susanna's cowardly fright. She glided between the two men like an eel, and stood panting and glaring round her at the foot of the bed. All her cunning,

all her bravado, had come to an end; and now her brain seemed turning as she looked round and saw the finish of her work. She standing there, robed and jewelled—the lady of Gledstyne Hall; her husband dying by his own hand, which he had lifted against himself to be freed from her; the grand gentlemen, from whom she had thought to command respect and admiration, looking down upon her with disgust and horror; the poor people—her own people, she had thought to rise above and crush under her dainty heel—coming forward to lay hands on her in her own house. Ay, and I could see her wild disordered brain showed her more than these—for, as she fixed her eyes on the bare wall, such a look of horror came over her face, that it might have been Martha on her death-bed that she saw and heard crying to her, in her weak, piping voice, "Susanna! Susanna! right those that I have wronged!" It was as if she fancied the dead as well as the living whom she had injured were coming about her to lay rough hands on her, for her pale blue eyes rolled distractedly, and she kept stretching out her hands

with the palms outwards, as if she were defending herself against thousands. The touch of one of the men's hands on her shoulder seemed to madden her completely. She wrenched herself from him like a tigress, with a half-smothered shriek gave one look round, and then turned and rushed through the women and servants—who drew back shuddering—and out at the doorway into the wide corridor. The doors at the end leading on to the terrace stood open, and the moonlight poured in, so that we could see her distinctly as she flew along, tearing as she went the wedding-ring from her finger, the bracelets from her arms, the jewel-flower from her long yellow hair—ay, and even shreds of her dress. Once—(and O, how that set my flesh creeping, for it made everything so awfully real!)—once she turned, and gave the old look over her shoulder; and then, though not a soul had stirred to follow her, she shrieked and flew on, and on, her white-slippered feet hardly touching the polished floor. Another instant, and the lithe tall figure stood swaying on the terrace wall, sixty feet above

the court-yard. The shrieks of fright suddenly changed to wild, piercing yells of laughter, the long white arms were tossed into the air—and then all was still as death; and there was nothing to be seen but the white line of terrace-wall, and the jewels lying here and there on the dark floor, sparkling in the moonlight. A few minutes after, the church clock struck twelve, and the bells broke out—the black year was over!

* * * * *

You may be sure the young squire (God bless him!) didn't want for kind hearts about him, and careful doctoring; but for all that, he lay for three days between life and death. On the fourth day he woke from a heavy sleep, and, for the first time since he had seen *her* leaning over him, he seemed perfectly sensible. It had been an anxious morning, for the doctor had told us some change, for better or worse, must come in a few hours, and crowds of people hung about the place waiting to hear. The gentry who had taken the upper hand at the Hall could not keep the poor women from pushing in and listening at the

bedroom door; some even got into the room, and sat hushing their babies behind the curtains. I was the first person he asked for when he opened his eyes; and when I bent down to him, he said—

"Matthew, where is she? I'm glad you've got her away; but she must be looked after. She mustn't starve, nor come to any harm."

"Stephen," I said (and it seemed a comfort to him to hear the old name), "Susanna won't harm herself or any one again. She's dead!"

He stared at me as if he couldn't understand me, at first; then a kind of light came over his face—and he burst into tears, and threw himself into my arms, and said, after awhile—

"I shan't die, Matthew. I'll live, and try and forget all that's past, and do my duty by these poor people, as my father did."

END OF OLD MATTHEW'S PUZZLE.

# SEVEN MINUTES PAST SEVEN.

When I had finished, and just as Mr. James was getting ready to make some cutting-up remark about my puzzle, Mistress Sicklemore rose, and said she had heard the gate-bell ring twice while I had been speaking, and she had no doubt but what we should find lawyer Ferrers waiting in the next room.

She went out, and in a minute came back with not only the lawyer, but old Mr. Cheriton, our curate.

While he and Mistress Sicklemore were paying one another their usual string of compliments, and curtseys, and bows, I managed to say to lawyer Ferrers—

"Have you got it, sir?"

He nodded, and tapped his pocket, and while

he went and spoke to Mr. James and Martin, I whispered to Mr. Cheriton—

"He's not to know I asked you to come, please, sir."

I then drew the table to the bedside and laid all that they could want on it; and, while Mr. James kept on beseeching of his brother not to trouble about it on such a day, the housekeeper and I came out and left them making the will.

It was about an hour after, and when we were getting tea together in her little room, that we heard both our names called by Mr. Ferrers from Martin's bedroom door.

"Matthew," said the lawyer when we went in, "I want you to send me up two of your fellow servants to witness the signing of the will. No, thank you, you two won't do." I wondered for the moment whether he knew I couldn't write. But presently he said, "Well, well, I cannot help giving you the pleasure of thanking the squire, by telling you of the very handsome way in which he has remembered you both in the will."

Mistress Sicklemore curtseyed to the lawyer, to the bed, to the curate, and to Mr. James; and I, of course, spoke my thanks, "but then you see, sir," said I aloud, so that Martin could hear—"it's such a very safe thing for 21 to leave legacies to 81." Martin smiled, and the curate and Mr. Ferrers laughed, but Mr. James looked grim and shook his head, as if he thought it a very cruel and ill-timed joke. I soon hunted up two of the people who could write; and while all the business of signing and witnessing was gone formally through, Mr. James remained as sad and anxious-looking as ever; and as though he did, in his utmost soul, disapprove of the whole proceeding. But while the will was being locked up in the cabinet drawer, his face was a perfect study: there were really two sides to it, the one nearest his brother full of anxious pain, and the other bright with sudden relief and a flash of exulting triumph in the eye.

Martin had been greatly worried by it all, and was looking pale and fagged—longing, I

could see, for us all to go away, that he might sink back into his old dangerous state of watching and waiting.

"I wish they would go, Matthew," he said to me, as I tried to make him take a spoonful of raspberry cream that Mistress Sicklemore had brought in for him. "What on earth brought that Cheriton here?"

When I put the plate down on the sideboard, lawyer Ferrers whispered to me—

"Am I to bring it out now?"

"No, sir," I said. "As he's most impatient for Mr. Cheriton to go, I think we'll keep yours by a bit, and let him get his over first."

I gave the hint to the curate, and he went up to Martin and said—

"When Matthew came to me this morning, and asked me if I could think of something to occupy your mind for an hour or so——"

Didn't Martin give me a frown from behind his hand! I didn't think there was energy enough in him to make such a grimace. And didn't I pass the look on to the blunder-

ing old gentleman who had quite forgot my warning!

"I was employed," the curate continued, without having seen either of our looks, "in correcting a small literary experiment which I was intending to send to a new miscellany devoted to the interests of the Church and safe popular mental recreation, which several clergymen in the neighbourhood are going to publish at the low price of twopence a month. I can't say it's my own writing. The authorship is to be a bit of a secret at present, but I have satisfied myself of its sound and wholesome character. So it struck me that this very story which has sprung from an incident in the life of a valued friend of your father's—it struck me that this might answer our good Matthew's purpose in occupying your mind a short time."

Martin Pole after giving "our good Matthew" another look that at any other time would have made him shake in his shoes, begged Mr. Cheriton to make himself comfortable and begin; and when the old gentleman, with many bows and

flourishes, had handed Mistress Sicklemore to the easy chair, and when the other gentlemen had taken their seats near the bed, and I had taken mine at a respectable distance, he sat himself down, drew a neat little blue paper book from his pocket, and began:—

# FACE TO FACE.

"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face."

## CHAPTER I.

### THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY.

WHAT can be amiss at the curate's house this afternoon? It is Christmas Eve, yet the children are huddling round the parlour fire, too miserable to speak a word to each other. The curate is out, for one thing. If he were at home, be sure you would soon hear the laughter of the whole six ringing through the half-empty rooms this Christmas Eve. But now he is out. They saw him set off after dinner, with Thomas Gubb, the clerk, who bore a great bag containing a lot of warm things for the poorer parishioners, that their father had collected from the richer ones. The boys would have liked to have gone too, but when

they were about to start, Freddy found the sole of his boot peel right off, and their sister protested that as, for some time to come, the lads would have but one pair between them, Georgy had better stay at home and let the boots, which were already growing thin, be kept for important occasions. And so all the six had sat moping by themselves in the parlour since dinner-time, their natural love of fun apparently quite gone out of them, looking through the window at the falling snow in the churchyard, poking their fingers through the high wire fender, and peeping at the sugar-basin in the cupboard. The house seemed very dreary that afternoon, and Miss Margaret, the curate's eldest daughter, decidedly cross. She had been out since her father's departure, refusing to take anyone with her, and had come back with a great brown-paper parcel, which she would tell them nothing about, and had enjoined them not to speak of to their father until she gave them leave. As they had some hope of its turning out to be a cake (though, if so, it must be of decidedly limp constitution), they did not

worry her. After getting tea ready, she sat in the rocking-chair and took the youngest child on her knee, and began to tell them all a most exciting story about Cinderella; but instead of making the Prince's ambassador say, "Does the slipper fit?" she made him say, "Do the clothes fit?" and when the children laughed at the mistake she smiled sadly, and, saying she must finish another time, took a candle and left the room, the children looking after her with a dim sense of something wrong.

The clock was striking as Margaret Lattimer crossed the bare hall. She stood for a moment at the foot of the stairs, counting it.

"Five," she said to herself, sitting down on the bottom stair. "He's sure to be in directly. Ten minutes more, and it will be all over. There's hardly time, but I must have one more look." Taking her candle, she ran up the carpetless stairs, stopped at a door on the first landing, and went in. It was the curate's bedroom. On a chair beside the hard narrow bed lay a clean shirt. Miss Margaret set her candle down on

the drawers, and, taking up the shirt, revealed underneath a suit of shining black clothes, which had evidently not come direct from the tailor, but been just sufficiently worn to take the set of the wearer's form. What could it be that made the little hands tremble so as she held them up and examined them all over, feeling the thick substance and the soft, satiny surface, and then replaced them in due order—coat, waistcoat, and trousers? These, then, were the clothes as to the fit of which the Prince's ambassador had been inquiring. She laid them down on the chair, and sat looking at them with burning, red cheeks, and the tears coming into her eyes. There was something in that fair, sad picture—that still and statue-like distress—which seemed quite in harmony with the bareness and poverty of the place, and yet that seemed to supply all its deficiencies. She sat on the edge of the bed in her brown linsey dress looking so exquisitely fresh, such a perfect little lady, that you would find it hard to believe the curate's daughter did all the work of that old house; and yet, perhaps,

if I tell you that the Rev. John Lattimer's entire income was just a hundred pounds, with rent and taxes to pay out of the hundred, you will perceive that he found seven children quite enough to keep without a servant. Miss Margaret's face was fair and her eyes blue, so intense and clear in their blueness that, when any anger or agitation sent a heat towards them, you could see the faint cloudiness come over them: a change from azure to violet. Her hair was light, not golden, except when you could see the sunshine through it, but it made a very lovely frame to that round, clear-cut girlish face. The cloudiness I have mentioned was over the eyes now as they looked down upon the black clothes on the chair.

"What will he say? what will he say?" she murmured, once more taking up the coat.

At that instant a loud summons on the rusty knocker of the door made Miss Margaret start to her feet, hastily arrange the clothes on the chair as they were before, and, taking her candle, fly down the stairs, her heart's beat keeping time with her steps.

"Such a night, children! such a night! There, mind you don't get drowned!"

The curate was shaking his coat in the hall, sprinkling with snow-flakes all the little creatures who had rushed in a body to the door at his knock.

"So gad you've come, pa," said little Jeannie; "it's been such a miser'ble day."

"A miserable day!" exclaimed the curate, taking her up in his arms, "What, Christmas Eve!"

"Yes; but it's such a cold Kissmas, pa," said the child, shivering down upon his shoulder, "and we have such a ittle, tiny fire!"

Mr. Lattimer walked into the parlour, and, after setting Jeannie in his arm-chair close by the fire, he stood on the rug, repeating to himself in a low voice,—

"Cold! Yes, poor children! it's a bright Christmas for them. All the prickly holly without the bright berries upon it: the cold, bitter frosting of the cake, but none of the cake itself!"

For a moment the curate stood before his fire looking down at it so fixedly that you could almost fancy the poor little fire was getting really embarrassed by his gaze, and ashamed of its littleness, for it winked, and blinked, and tottered in its foundations; and, at last, collecting all its force, blazed out in one bright singing flame that lit the room and made little Jeannie smile and stretch her tiny hands towards it. For one moment, I say, the curate stood looking down at it; and there came over his large, sharp-featured, pale face a dreariness and an inexpressible dull pain, as though something whispered to him, "Behold the fruits of eight-and-twenty years of toil!" But one moment, however, only one, did that look of pain cross the clear honesty and peace of the curate's face. The next a smile came upon it—a smile that was like a sudden flash of youth in its brightness and strength.

"Little ones," he said, tenderly taking Jeannie on his knee, and drawing two more thin forms within his arm—"little ones; do you think it strange that papa should work so hard, and yet

that we should have so little money? Shall I tell you how it is? Well, then, listen. Some men there are who work not nearly so hard and yet have many more comforts than we, because they may take all the profits of their work and spread them in comforts round their homes; but, my children, I mustn't do this: I work for a Master, for the good God, and to His profit alone. I take what is given me to live upon and to keep you with, but I cannot work for more. All the work of my hands and brain is His. Will you remember this, my darlings?"

There was only a silence in answer and a general pressing nearer to him, and the touch of many soft small trustful hands on his arms and knees.

Why did Miss Margaret keep aloof all this time? Did she not feel the truth of what he said? There was a cloud on her fair face, as though she did not quite.

"Here are your slippers, papa."

"Thanks. Why, Margaret, what's the matter? Have you got the headache?"

"No, papa—yes, a little; but, papa, will you come in the kitchen? I have some news for you."

Mr. Lattimer rose and followed her.

"Really this is a most comfortable kitchen, Margaret," said the curate, shivering, as he sat on the edge of the table; "a fact one is apt to forget after cooking-time, when you always let the fire out. Well, what news, what news? Has Vaughan been here?"

"No," Miss Margaret answered with decision; "something much more important than that."

"I don't know, my child," said Mr. Lattimer, laughing, and shaking his head. "I expect one of his comings some day will be of considerable importance to me."

"Never mind that now, papa," Miss Margaret answered quickly.

"Well, well—the news? I hope it isn't so bad or so good as to try my nerves; for, if so, I should like a cup of tea first."

"Papa, I met Mr. Amoore and the Doctor

when I was out this afternoon, and they told me—guess what."

"That the new rector has come and brought his own curate, and is going to turn us out."

"O, papa! No, but that they have both been to Sir George Blount to ask for the living for you; and that, though Sir George was a little put out about their interference, they have got you an invitation to the hall this evening."

"Yes, most likely to tell me what he did not choose to tell them, that he thinks such a proceeding utterly unwarrantable, and to ask whether I sanctioned or encouraged it."

"O, papa, he could not be so cruel as that."

"Well, we'll hope for the best; but he mustn't try me too far by his unworthy suspicions or his extreme views of the rights of property in such matters, else I shall tell him my mind very plainly."

"But come, papa, you have scarcely time to dress and get there by six, and you were not to be a minute later."

It was very strange, but Miss Margaret no

sooner said the word "dress" than the colour rushed up to her face.

"My dear, five minutes is time enough for any man to put a clean shirt on," said the curate. "And that, you know, is the only change in dress I can make, whether for Church or State occasions. Come, I must have a cup of tea first."

"And so he would really go in those clothes," thought Miss Margaret, as she followed him into the parlour; "why, he didn't seem to have a thought of what they were like after so much hard wear;" and while making the tea she pictured him to herself entering Sir George's drawing-room, Miss Effie's and all the young ladies' eyes turning on him, the proposed new rector.

No: certainly the Rev. John Lattimer, as he stood on his own hearth talking to his children and making them break out every now and then into peals of laughter by some good round hearty Christmas joke, certainly he did not seem weighed down in spirit by any sense of the meanness of

his garb. Perhaps the work he had done in it, the hearts he had comforted, the minds he had enlightened, the deathbeds he had prayed over in it, had invested the fading habiliments with a kind of sanctifying halo even in his own eyes. He did not contract his chest because he was sensible of a darn encroaching rather forwardly in front of his shirt, but held himself erect, flung back his shoulders, and all unconsciously let the miserable little darn do its worst for him in the world's eyes; and so, instead of its making him look ridiculous, he made the darn look ridiculous and absurdly out of place. He wore his poverty in his heart, as he wore the seedy coat on his back, with unflinching erectness, never giving the least way to its presence, never letting it eat into it; but keeping it separate and distinct, as a garment to be one day thrown off as he threw off his coat at night. So with his children. Fate had given to his boys a strength and breadth of limb, a natural erectness of bearing, and to his girls a grace, a vividness of bloom, which, while it made the

shabbiness of their garb more conspicuous, yet held it off from them and kept it from appearing as part of their characters. It is wonderful how much poverty can be borne without sacrifice of health and happiness if only the mind sink not, but keep itself healthy, pure, and vigorous. For this reason, so far was the curate's home from having an air of stinginess or dulness that many a young and needy curate would come from miles round to bask for an hour or so in the sunshine and plenty which all those happy young faces and rich voices at ordinary times gave an impression of. I do not say but that, perhaps, one face and one voice proved a greater attraction than any of the rest; but I do say that, though there was often a good deal of moping and sighing in the curate's parlour, there was not one of those young curates but would just as soon have gone to the hall and demanded the hand of the rich and beautiful Miss Effie as he would have asked John Lattimer for his "penniless daughter," his "light-haired, sunny Margaret," his "pearl beyond price:" for so

the fond father would at different times and moods call her. Besides, though there had been no positive engagement, yet it was well known that Harry Vaughan, the young curate of Lescombe, and a poor and distant relation of Sir George Blount, with whom he was then exerting all his influence to obtain the rectory for Mr. Lattimer;—it was well known, I repeat, that Harry Vaughan had a pretty firm footing at the curate's house; and what man in all the parish of Littlington would have dared to enter into rivalry with him? Yes, it was looked upon as a sure thing that, what with his having the ear of Sir George, and what with the influence of Dr. Ellet and old Mr. Amoore, the Rev. John Lattimer would get the living; that Vaughan would be his curate, marry Miss Margaret, and keep on the old house; and everybody agreed that it was a most desirable state of things.

"Come, papa, it's really getting very late," said Miss Margaret, after she had poured him out a third cup of tea.

"My dear, I must not go hungry, or I shall be

making an unseemly attack on the refreshments at Sir George's, and the young ladies will be saying, 'Harry Vaughan has sent a wolf after the rectory.' But come, a candle. Ta! ta! children; papa must go and make himself beautiful. By-the-bye, Margaret, have I a clean necktie?"

"Yes; but I think, papa, the one you have on is the best. Here is the other. What do you think?"

"Well," said the curate, shaking it out, and looking at the darns, "perhaps you are right, Margaret. Perhaps it is a little too elaborately embroidered for a simple evening call." Then, remembering how closely she had sat over it all the morning nearly, he added, with that tenderness that gave to his rugged features and big form an almost courtly grace, "but put it by, lassie; put it by carefully; I don't wear my Margaret's work where it will be scoffed at, not I; I keep it and wear it as the knights of old wore their ladies' favours in the battle-field; there, put it by for church to-morrow." And, taking the candle from her, the curate went up-stairs.

No sooner had he left the room than Miss Margaret flung the neckcloth on the sideboard, went out, and, shutting the parlour-door after her, stood in the middle of the dark hall listening intently. Now, the curate always had a firm, reliant, somewhat heavy tread, as though spiritually he were sure of the foundations he had laid for himself; but to-night, as he mounted the stairs, after having just looked his poverty in the face through that well-darned neckcloth, Miss Margaret thought his step was absolutely a proud one; and the nearer it approached to his own room the more violently throbbed that little, listening heart under the brown linsey. Inch by inch she crept to the foot of the stairs. She heard his hand on the doorlatch—all the doors of the house had latches:—she saw the light pass suddenly off the staircase wall, and heard his door close again; then, glad for once in her life of the thinness of her shoes, flew up noiselessly, not pausing till she stood close outside his door. The curate had taken up with him a sheet of notes for his sermon, not the Christmas-day sermon, which

was already written, but one for the Sunday following; and, while going on with his dressing, he kept adding more notes, repeating them first in his stentorian voice, the lowest, deepest tone of which was clear and rounded enough for Miss Margaret to hear every word distinctly.

"St. Paul says—umph; see 1 Corinthians, 2nd chapter."

Then there was a walk across the room, and she heard the chair, on which all her thoughts were bent, dragged forward from its place.

"Now," she murmured, closing her eyes and pressing both hands to her side, "now!"

But no; the discovery she dreaded was not yet made. The curate had evidently left the chair to go and make another note, for presently she heard his voice again.

"As shown by the sparrows, St. Luke xii.; and further illustrated in the same chapter, from 'Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat; neither for the body, what ye shall put on,' down to 'How

much more will He clothe you, O ye of little faith?'"

What relation could these notes bear to Miss Margaret that her pretty mouth should quiver so at the corners as she listened? But hark! there is the chair dragged hold of again. Perhaps he was only going to move it out of his way. No; a dead silence! He sees; he evidently sees! Presently there is a low exclamation,

"What the deuce——umph! What does it mean? Bless my soul! why!"

Then came a heavy stride across the room, a sudden opening of the door, and a tremendous shout of,

"Margaret!" that nearly knocked the quivering little listener down.

"Papa, papa!"

Mr. Lattimer retreated a few paces back into his bedroom. He was almost as much startled by the sudden apparition of his daughter as she had been by his call.

A piteous picture was Miss Margaret just then. There she stood, her two little hands clasped on

her side, her blue eyes big with tears, her round rose of a face all paled with fright, and her light hair lifted off her shoulders by the sudden blast that rushed at her from the curate's cold, draughty room. Yes, the sight of her seemed even a greater surprise for him than that which he had just had; but still he could not help connecting the two things together, so, laying his hand on her shoulder, he drew her gently in.

"Why, Margaret, what is this? Sit down. Quiet yourself. There! Now tell me, my child, where have these clothes come from?"

She looked up as she sat on the foot of the bed, holding the brass knob of the bedstead tightly; looked up, and saw him standing there pointing down at the clothes.

"O, papa, don't be angry. I'm afraid after all it's very wrong what I've done; but what will become of us if you don't get the rectory?"

"What have these clothes to do with my getting the rectory, Margaret?"

"Papa, if you go in your old ones to Sir George he will not like it; he will think,—that is, I

mean, Harry says he is so anxious that the new rector should be quite a gentleman, and all that; not like Mr. Scott, you know."

"Well, Margaret?"

"Well, papa, seeing how everything almost seemed to depend upon Sir George liking you when you go, I was determined to get you some clothes somehow. There was only one way."

"And what was that? You would not go in debt, I think?"

"O, no, papa!"

"How, then?"

"The society, papa, that you were telling me about for aiding poor clergymen in great difficulty. I found it very hard, but I wrote and told them all about it; and though I said you didn't know, and that if they wouldn't believe me I couldn't do anything more, they have believed me, and sent me what I asked for."

"And now, Margaret?"

Why now Miss Margaret had no more to say. She looked at him through her tears and wondered how she could have done it—how she could have

doubted his looking gentlemanly, let him go in what garb he might—he who stood there in his shirt-sleeves, proud, offended, almost grand, in the humiliation she had brought upon him.

"And, Margaret," said the curate presently, "suppose they had not sent them; suppose I had gone in these, disgraced myself, and lost the rectory; what then?"

Miss Margaret rose up and smiled; then, tremblingly and tearful, but still feeling a little strength, a little justification, for her behaviour, she began.

"Papa," she said, sweetly and firmly; "papa, you would not have disgraced yourself; you would only have lost the rectory; and we should only be just as we have been all along. I should have spoken to Harry, and he would never have come here any more. That is how it would have been —how it shall be now if you like, if you cannot wear these things—only do forgive me, papa! It was so hard to do it!"

Mr. Lattimer looked at the clothes and looked at his daughter. Now, I should remark that

Miss Margaret, for all her sweetness, ruled over the curate's house with a certain piquant tyranny. A fortunate thing, too, it was for her, poor motherless soul, that with those wild boys she had it in her; and a natural thing, too, being so very pretty and so very clever, and so very sure that things at the curate's must all go to ruin without her. I tell you this that you may the better understand Mr. Lattimer's feelings as he stood by the bedside, looking first at the clothes and then at his daughter; offering, with a face so piteously meek, and sorry, and earnest, to give up for him and her little brothers and sisters the love-dream of her life—the one hope she had of release from poverty and toil—Harry Vaughan, whose love, it was whispered, one of Sir George Blount's daughters had tried in vain to win. Should they let her do it, the curate thought, for himself and for his little ones? Should they keep their sweet rose all to themselves, and make that black-eyed Vaughan go about his business? Or should he put the clothes on, go and bear humiliation for her as she had borne it for him, get the rectory,

perhaps, and be rid of her? It was a sore struggle. He looked at the clothes, took them up, and said, with a grimace—

"Was he an honest man who wore them, Margaret, I wonder?"

"You'll soon see, papa; they won't fit you unless he was."

"Then I'll put them on."

"O, papa, papa!" She flew and clasped him round the neck, sobbing against his shoulder as though her very heart would break.

"Yes, I'll put them on, and if my flesh creeps, I'll say the flesh is proud, and not the clothes vile. I am proud, Margaret; it is the one thing that hinders me about my business. I think many of my cloth are. If so, God forgive us; for it can only be through the magnitude and grandeur of the message we convey, not through the quality of the messengers. There, look up, my pet; I'll put them on like a man, I mean like a charity boy. Come, Margaret, don't frown; there's been many a decent charity boy before me."

"O, don't, papa!"

"Well, I won't. There, run along down-stairs and prepare the children for my magnificence; and if a genteel appearance, or thy bravery, my own darling, will win it, never fear. O, I'll get the rectory!"

Miss Margaret ran down, kissed the children all round, and, while moving away the tea-things, behaved altogether in so fascinating a manner as to perfectly bewilder them, till at last it got whispered round (for scandal will circulate, even amongst children) that Mr. Vaughan must be coming.

In less than ten minutes Mr. Lattimer came down.

"Now, little ones," he cried holding out his arms, "what do you think of papa as a charity boy?"

Margaret was not pained this time, because his words were followed by a chorus of small laughter, and by a roar and stamp of the foot in sympathetic merriment from the curate himself.

"Why, he looks grand—grand," she said, clap-

ping her hands; "and the clothes, I feel positive, never looked half as well before." But she stopt with the exclamation, "Whoever can that be!"

It was a loud, hurried knock at the door. Margaret ran to open it.

"Dr. Ellet!" she exclaimed.

The little old doctor poked himself in, open umbrella and all, panting and blowing.

"Where's your father?" he asked.

"In there, doctor. Have you come for him? Is Sir George angry about his being so late?"

"Has Amoore been?"

"No, doctor."

The doctor gave a satisfied "Umph!" He would, no doubt, rather be the bearer of good news than bad, but he liked to be the first bearer of either.

"Lattimer!" he cried out, panting, across the hall.

"Here, doctor! What news—what news? What! Have we gained the day without my going at all? That would please me!"

"Gained the day!" grunted the doctor, sink-

ing on a chair by the door, and panting between every word. "Gained the day! Ugh! I go up to the Hall—Amoore and I. You're sure, Miss Margaret, that Amoore hasn't been here?"

"O, no," said the curate; "your news is as fresh as this very moment."

"I go up to the Hall, I find them in the drawing-room—Sir George, the young ladies, Stevens, and some others whom I got there to meet and to support you. I sit down. I listen to the talk a few minutes. I make a discovery, Lattimer."

"Quiet yourself, my dear sir," said the curate, smiling.

"Quiet myself, sir!" shrieked the doctor, getting up and taking the curate by the button-hole, still panting. "I make a discovery, sir; so does Amoore. We both set off at once, only Amoore goes round by the mill, which—ugh! you know—he will have it, is the nearest way. I come up the churchyard, and, consequently, get here first. He'll be here directly, and I'll face him with the fact. He can't deny it."

"My dear doctor, this discovery?" said the curate. "You have but set our curiosity on edge."

Hearing a footstep outside, and seized with a fear that Amoore might yet get the news out before him, the little doctor determined to be explicit and sudden.

"Lattimer, the living is disposed of."

There was a silence throughout the room. Margaret did not faint nor scream—did not even utter a single exclamation. She sat down by the fire, and held Jeannie close to her to shroud her face. The doctor sat on his chair, panting; the curate stood erect before him in calm reflection. Presently he turned and held his hand out to his daughter, saying, with a smile, but not a very firm voice—

"Margaret, we can bear it?"

How much there was in the *we!* She understood him.

"Yes, papa," she said, quite firmly, giving him her hand, and looking up at him with her eyes full of tears.

"Well, doctor," said the curate, getting out the decanter with the little drop of wine in it that was obliged to be kept in the old oak sideboard, let times be ever so hard, "tell us who our new rector is."

A sudden groan from the doctor made him turn round; Miss Margaret turned round too.

"The young coxcomb!" he ejaculated. "But I always saw through him, though Amoore never could."

"Who has the living?" asked the curate, point blank, pausing, with the decanter raised in one hand and the glass in the other.

The doctor mumbled and fidgeted in his chair, and almost wished that Amoore would drop in and finish the business.

The curate set down the glass and decanter, strode across the room to him, and in deep tones, pregnant with new meaning—

"Dr. Ellet," he said, bringing his clenched hand heavily down on his shoulder, "who has got the living?"

"Who, sir? Why, who but that underhanded

young puppy, with his aristocratic airs and graces —that "——

"Who?"

"Harry Vaughan. There! there!"

Another long pause and a deep silence.

"Margaret, my love, can we bear this also?" asked the curate of his daughter, his voice now a little tremulous.

Her head was bent down on Jeannie's shoulder, but at his voice she lifted it up proudly and again answered—

"Yes, papa."

"You know how it is, of course," said Dr. Ellet; "at least, you can guess the rest, as we did. He's in love with Miss Effie Blount, it appears, and she with him; and Sir George, knowing the young man wouldn't have the audacity to propose marriage on his income, has loosened his tongue for him to-night by bestowing this living. I never knew such a scandalous thing in my life. And he to complain of our interference, too! as if your twenty-eight years of ministry didn't entitle us even to ask him to think of you. But

if you'll excuse me, I'll go and meet Amoore, and take him home to have a chat, and see what *he* says about it."

"Certainly, doctor. Good evening!" said the curate in a dry voice, taking up the candle. And, bowing to Miss Margaret, who, however, did not return his salutation, the little doctor bustled out of the parlour, took up his umbrella, and went forth in search of his friend and double.

The Rev. John Lattimer, after shutting out Dr. Ellet, returned to the parlour, took his boots from the corner and put them on. His movements were sharp and abrupt, and he seemed as though he dared not trust himself to look at Margaret; he could not, however, help turning round just as he was leaving the room. She had put Jeannie down, and sat in the rocking chair, with her hands clasped in her lap, her head bowed forward on her breast, and all the sweet rose tints gone out of her face, leaving it as pallid as death, and the cloud over her tearless blue eye deepening.

John Lattimer looked at her from where he

stood. And this was Margaret, his merry bird, his red rose, his dear, precious little household tyrant, first won from him, and then cast back upon his hearth, thus crushed, chilled, smitten to the core. Well, well! He went to her and held out his arms, and she fell into them like a broken flower.

"My pet, my bonny pet," he said, huskily; "her Christmas present, these clothes, shall not now pass for nothing; papa will yet pay his visit to the Hall. Children, take care of your sister."

He set her back in the rocking chair, and Jeannie on her knee, went out, and for once in his life the Rev. John Lattimer, as he slammed the heavy door behind him, was at last, in his passion, but as a straw in the wind.

## CHAPTER II.

### BUT THEN FACE TO FACE.

To hear that slam of the door, to hear those three or four heavy, desperate footsteps cross the wet road, to hear the swing of the churchyard gate, was to make the stricken heart at the fireside of the curate's house awaken from the stupor of its first great anguish, and throb with a new terror.

To what would those reckless footsteps lead them all? Ruin! Absolute ruin! He would go to Sir George, to *him*—go, stung with her wrong—would offend them both beyond all forgiveness—would lose the curacy.

Miss Margaret pushed the children away from her and rose to her feet. Something must be done. What? She pressed her hands to her temples, and her soul sent up a wild, voiceless

prayer for help. Was there anything—ay, anything, however desperate—she could do to avert the impending blow? O! show it to her, and she would do it! For some minutes she struggled helplessly to think of something. At last a thought came. It was a cruel one; so bitter as to make her utter a sharp cry as it struck her, yet she held it fast.

"I will do it," she said, "if it kill me! I will do it!"

Another minute—and Miss Margaret, in her old garden-hat and cloak, which she had snatched from the hall chair, was half way through the churchyard. The rain had ceased, and the moon was rising over the hall gables, but the wind was wilder than ever, driving sharply into those blue, onward-gazing eyes, and tearing and tangling all that light, floating hair, as if to remind her mockingly how worthless it had become to him who once was never tired of praising it. The churchyard was soon left behind, the lane entered, and the village lights close before her. On she went through the miry street crowded

with people, most of whom knew and recognised her, and soon she was running in the dark shade of the rectory garden wall.

The path was narrow; and, hearing wheels splashing close to it a little behind her, Margaret stopped for the first time since she had left home to lean against the rectory gates and to take breath while the carriage should pass.

A workman, with his bag on his shoulder, was coming through, and he left the gates wide open. Miss Margaret shrank back a little out of the road into the rectory garden, that the carriage lamps might not reveal her to the inmates, who were, doubtless, visitors to the hall, and might know her. In an instant not the carriage-side, but two horses' heads came in sight, turned towards her, then a light flashed across her face, and the carriage, passing through the gates, rolled up the drive. Miss Margaret turned and looked after it, and saw for the first time that the house, which for the last month since the old rector's death had been under repair, appeared to be quite finished, and was all lit up as

if for some party or reception. She guessed the probable meaning instantly; knew who they were in that carriage—the Blounts, of course, come to put the new rector in possession. In that case, they must surely have left the Hall before her father could possibly have reached it. No fresh mischief, then, had been done yet; and now it was for her to act:—to do what she had determined upon doing; to avert the blow before he had time to come from the Hall to the rectory. "Could she do that thing," Miss Margaret asked herself; "could she do it, after all?" She looked towards the house. The carriage was just leaving the door which stood open; and in the hall, with its darkly-polished floor, stood two figures, only two—Harry Vaughan's and Miss Effie Blount's. He was taking off her heavy black cloak; and when she stood without it, looking round with a languid interest, Miss Margaret shut her eyes at once, dazzled and chilled, and turned her back upon the rectory, to leave it for ever, and to let things take their own course. But then, when she came out of the gates, and

her sick heart turned for comfort to those little ones at home; then, when again she remembered that angry, indignant spirit which even now must be drawing nearer and nearer, and which if she left it to wreak its force, must bring them instantaneous ruin,—then she turned back.

Miss Margaret turned back; she tried to think of nothing in the world but the words she wished to say; tried to keep her eyes from looking at that open door and cheerful hall while she approached it. The rectory had indeed known a resurrection since the Rev. Noel Scott inhabited it, with his dogs and fancy poultry always working mischief in the garden, and breaking the solitary gardener's heart. Leaving the carriage-drive, which went curving round the lawn to the house, Miss Margaret almost lost herself in the little paths winding in and out among the evergreens; and was obliged to make her way out on to the soft wet lawn, and run across it before she could get to the house. That, too, was looking as solidly handsome and comfortable, with its crimson curtains and

glimpses into richly-furnished rooms, as a white picturesque, round, two-storied, and verandahed house could look. As she came nearer to the door, Miss Margaret perceived the hall was deserted. She entered, stood on the mat just within the threshold, and then paused, breathless after her run, and dizzy with the sudden light and warmth. A door on the left of the hall was open, showing a large room nearly surrounded with bookshelves—half study, half drawing-room —just such a place as she knew Vaughan liked to work in. At that end which the open door revealed to her she saw no one, but she had stood there scarcely half a minute before she heard a voice speaking within :—

"This is really too bad of papa! He promised me to be here first, or I am sure I should not have come."

"I should have been sorry for that," was the reply.

Miss Margaret did not dare to hear more. She shrank back into the shade of the old portico as she heard the rustle of Miss Effie's dress. She

watched her across the hall with two white vases in her hands, and enter a room on the opposite side.

"Now," murmured Miss Margaret, with a wild flutter at her heart; "now, or not at all."

She tore off her hat and cloak, for the vision of fresh fair elegance that had just passed her made their dowdiness almost unendurable; and, pushing her hair from her face, she passed quickly across the hall, entered the door by which Miss Effie had just entered, and closed it after her. Now, Miss Effie was drawing back the heavy damask curtain, and did not hear the closing of that door; nor did she then immediately turn, but stood looking out upon the wild moonlight night. Margaret went up almost close to her. Still she did not turn, but stood with her beautiful arm raised, holding back the red curtain; and presently, as if overburdened with quiet, dreamy happiness, she bent her head upon the window-frame and sighed. Then Margaret touched her, trying to speak her name,

but failing, and only moving her lips dumbly. Miss Effie started and half screamed; but the instant she turned and saw who stood beside her, she controlled herself by one strong effort, and looked at the pale, breathless girl with a haughty, questioning gaze. They had seen each other before at church, or at poor people's houses on visits of charity, but had never spoken; for, besides having a little jealousy rankling in her heart against Miss Effie, the curate's daughter was shy, and had always done her utmost to shun the beautiful young lady whom Harry and every one praised so for her cleverness, her magnificent Italian singing, and her generosity to the poor. Now, a certain instinct, vague, but unquestionably true, told Margaret that Miss Effie knew her as well as she knew Miss Effie at this moment; and the gaze of distant, proud surprise burned into her heart. It was a new and exquisitely painful humiliation heaped upon the previous wrong;—this fact, which Miss Effie's look wanted to make her feel, namely, that she was so far from acknowledging an infringement upon

Margaret's claim with regard to Vaughan as to pretend even an utter ignorance of Margaret's self. She tried to forget all this; tried to speak; but her heart swelled, and her lips were tied with as haughty a silence as Miss Effie's, and for nearly a minute there stood the two girls—face to face—looking at each other; Miss Effie with her back to the window, and the red firelight dancing up her tall, full figure, bringing out the golden threads that were mixed with her rich brown hair, and revealing by fits a pale imperial brow, proud, melancholy, hazel eyes, a carmine cheek, a thin, sweet, tremulous mouth, a beauty in which was mingled a May freshness and an August colouring, a beauty which Margaret could not, in her heart, for one moment deny. And there was the curate's little daughter with the keen moonlight upon her, looking, with her tangled colourless hair, and white, anguished face, like a pink rose blanched by a single night of frost. And the two girls looked at each other, both in proud silence; and while they looked, and ere either had yet spoken, came hurried,

heavy footsteps crushing down the new gravel. The chilled rose could stand proudly on its stalk no longer; being human, it must shiver and speak.

"O! Miss Effie, Miss Effie!" Margaret cried, clasping her hands beseechingly and bursting into tears: "help me—save us! O, speak to Harry! Tell him papa is coming: that he is pained and angry with him. He will speak hard words to him; but O! Miss Effie, ask him, for my sake—no, no, I beg your pardon, I didn't mean that—for the children's sake, ask him not to mind, not to quarrel with him! It will ruin us, Miss Effie, if he quarrels with him. O! go, go and speak to Harry, while I keep him back a minute!"

During this appeal Miss Effie looked down into the pale, pleading face, relaxing not a whit the proud expression of her own; and when Margaret ceased speaking, she said coldly,—

"Do you know you have never yet told me who you are?"

Margaret's face grew rigid again, and her eyes

cloudy; but at the sound of a footstep in the hall she clasped Miss Effie's arm with both her hands and cried, in a husky, passionate voice—

"Effie Blount, you know me; you know me well enough. If you don't, I'll tell you who I am. I am Margaret Lattimer. Do you know me now? You are generous, Harry says; then don't make me humiliate myself any more. You are proud; then remember that I have had to pay dearly for all your happiness, and make me this return that I ask for your pride's sake. O, Miss Effie, do it, before it be too late. Quick! I hear them talking. O, come!"

Margaret ran to the door; Mr. Lattimer had just entered as Harry Vaughan was crossing the hall towards the room in which they were.

"Mr. Lattimer," he said, meeting him with outstretched hand, and slightly heightened colour.

The curate did not take his hand, but fronted him under the hall lamp, with a sharp scrutinising glance.

"So, Vaughan, we meet, face to face."

Vaughan bit his lip and looked down on the

polished floor, then threw an impatient glance towards Miss Effie, and saw Margaret standing by her. He made a step towards them, but Mr. Lattimer stopped him.

"Vaughan!"

"Well, sir?" returned Vaughan, sharply, stung by the curate's tone.

"Miss Effie! Miss Effie! for Heaven's sake, speak!" pleaded Margaret.

But Miss Effie looked down upon her with her calm, proud, melancholy eyes, and smiled, actually smiled, upon her in all her humiliation and fear.

Margaret then turned away from her in despair—almost hatred—and went to her father:—

"Come away, papa. Oh! come away."

"Be silent, Margaret," said her father, sternly. "Vaughan, I am unwilling to speak before this lady; but I must have some plain words with you to-night. Take me where you will, but I leave not till they are spoken."

"Mr. Lattimer," said Miss Effie, haughtily, "whatever charge you have to make against Mr.

Vaughan with regard to my father's behaviour, you will please to make before me."

"Very well, madam. Then I ask you, Harry Vaughan, have you considered at what peril you do all this?" demanded the curate, in a deeper and more threatening tone. "I will tell you, sir: honour, manliness, truth; this is the price you have paid for your bargain."

Miss Effie's eyes seemed to flash like fire as she caught the curate's gaze.

"Mr. Lattimer!" cried Vaughan, turning fiercely, and Margaret knew that the worst had come, for how could there be peace after this? "Mr. Lattimer!" but he stopped suddenly. Miss Effie had gone up to him at last. She was not altogether stone, then, Margaret owned, in spite of her bitter dislike of her. She was at last deigning to act the fine lady, and to plead for the poor savage, disappointed curate, that he might keep his curacy in spite of all his raving about his daughter's wrong. She only hoped now that she might be able to endure her bounty without some violent outburst, for she felt a heat

within her she had never known in her life before.

"Harry," said Miss Effie, and in speaking that name Margaret discovered for the first time that her voice was thrillingly sweet—"Harry, I will answer Mr. Lattimer." But she turned first to Miss Margaret, saying—

"Margaret Lattimer, you think you have cause of bitterness against me. You suffered great humiliation just now, when you came to ask me to plead for your father with Harry Vaughan. I did not make it easier for you by promising at once, as you thought I might have done. I allowed you to humble yourself before me, that you might feel for another when the time of her humiliation came. It has come."

"Effie!" said Vaughan, deprecatingly.

She looked towards him with a faint smile, half tender, half sad.

"Thank you, Harry; but I begin to understand at last. You have done your best to prevent any rude shocks, while I have been wandering like a child in the dark; and now that there

is light breaking, you still wish to spare me—to spare my pride. Harry, I am too proud to be thus dealt with."

"My dear Effie," again interposed Vaughan.

"Harry Vaughan, be silent. You might have spoken sooner, and I would have thanked you. But no, I did not mean to say that. I was unjust. But do not again interrupt me."

"Mr. Lattimer," continued she, turning towards him, and away from Margaret, "we have been thrown much together, Vaughan and I. He honoured me with his confidence in many things—I thought in all. He was poor, and proud, and constrained—so I fancied—to bury in his breast any—any—wishes—he might be secretly nourishing. He could not speak to my father; so I spoke for him when the late rector died." Miss Effie paused; her tones had been hard and low, yet wavering at times for an instant; only, however, to become again harder than before. Her face, at one moment crimson, changed in like manner to a terrible pallor. The expression alone never changed from its resolute

sternness, which gave an almost awful beauty to the noble features and proudly-set head. The pause was but for a moment; then she resumed:—

"My father had always liked him, and now liked him still more for what he esteemed his long and honourable silence. He was also, as you know, a distant relative. When the rectory became vacant, my father determined he should have it. He sent for him; but, as soon as he began to speak, Harry urgently entreated him to give it to you—so urgently, that my father was both surprised and offended. But, believing it only excess of delicacy on his part, he bade him take time for reflection—and tell him (Sir George) of his decision before revealing it to any one else; and then dropped the words, 'Go to Effie, and talk the matter over with her.'

"He came to me, repeated his refusal, and begged me to promote the transfer of Sir George's favour to you. I was hurt by the request. I, like my father, supposed he was afraid of the

seeming treachery to you, which we knew to be utterly without foundation. For his sake, and—as he may have guessed—for my own, I wished him to accept the rectory; but he still refused. I waited and wondered. Coming here to meet my father, I have been able to discover the rest."

As she ceased she again turned towards Margaret, advanced, saw the yearning look in those blue eyes and the slight quivering of the lip, advanced still nearer, put out her hand to draw back some of the dishevelled hair from Margaret's brow, drew her towards her, stamped a kiss on the bending forehead, and turned away, she not speaking a single word to Margaret, or Margaret to her.

"Harry, my boy," said the curate, holding out his hand, with tears in his eyes, "you don't mean to say you're not a rector at all?"

"No, indeed, that he is not," said Miss Effie, with an attempt to smile. "On the contrary, he is waiting, I imagine, in considerable trepidation, to learn what chance there is for him in

the curacy. He resigns Bittlestone, of course, where we have been accustomed to him so long, and must now, I hope, trust to you, Mr. Lattimer."

"To me!" said the curate, pushing the hair off his brow in undisguised amazement.

"Wait—I think I hear Sir George's carriage. Excuse me for a moment." She left the room and went into the garden. The carriage was just entering the gates. She went to meet it, beckoning to the coachman to stop where he was. As the coachman lowered the step she said to him, "Tell John to walk the horses once round the grounds before setting us down. Papa!" said she, hurriedly, to the gentleman within, who was closely muffled up in furs, "I have sadly committed myself, and you alone can bring me off handsomely. But do not blame Harry. It was all my mistake."

"You mean he doesn't want the rectory, after all?"

"No, papa, I mean that he doesn't want me." Sir George moved as if stung; there was an

angry exclamation, and then silence on both sides. Presently he said—

"Of course he gives up the rectory?"

"Papa, your promise, unsolicited too! Would you have it said that you bargained for me, and withdrew the rectory because he refused the daughter?"

"Why, Effie, you talk absurdly. I would rather, a thousand times, give it to that poor, half-starved Lattimer. In his way, he'd be a credit to the Church—if not exactly to me—and to my drawing-room."

"Papa, I have anticipated your very thought. Mr. Lattimer waits now a welcome from you."

"Here, John, turn round and drive home directly. You're a fool, Effie."

About this time there was a little bustle at the rectory door, an open umbrella cast into the hall, and the next instant Dr. Ellet had seized Vaughan by the hand.

"I congratulate you, my dear fellow. I don't know a man in the county worthier of the post. Am I the first, or has Amoore been before me?

He's such a gossip; and has such a weakness for short cuts. Bless me, Sir George here, too. Quite a party."

Yes, Sir George had come back, moved by some still more forcible logic, that Miss Effie had managed to apply.

"I come to welcome the new rector, Sir George."

"And I," said Sir George, extending his white and jewelled hand with a condescending flourish to Mr. Lattimer—"I have come to do the same, Mr. Lattimer, and to wish you health to enjoy your new dignity."

"Eh? what? Lattimer?" shrieked the little doctor. "Nonsense!"

"Sir!" said Sir George, turning upon him with majestic surprise, as he tapped his gold snuff-box. "Did you speak?"

"Sir! Sir George, is Lattimer the rector after all? Is he really though?"

"Yes, sir, most assuredly he is."

"But what did I hear this very morning, Sir George, from you in your drawing-room?"

"Sir," said Sir George, evidently with extreme annoyance, "you heard stale news, which you will oblige me by not alluding to again."

"Well! bless my soul! Lattimer, I *do* congratulate you! Really, what a marvellous transition of things." The doctor ran to fetch his umbrella, then said, "Here's a bit of news for Amoore! I might tell it to him first if I could but intercept him. Excuse me, Lattimer, I'll go. If I don't meet Amoore before I get to the cross-roads there's no saying how he'll come—he's so fond of short cuts. And if you get him here you'll have him for goodness knows how long, he is such a gossip. Good-night! Excuse my short visit. I shall come again." And off he went.

"And I, too, Mr. Lattimer, must be going. Effie waits in the carriage at the door, but I won't threaten to come again, not till you are comfortably settled. I have friends at home, and only came in at my daughter's wish to give you welcome to the Rectory. May I ask for your arm? Gout, did you say? O no, sir, merely a slight

rheumatic attack, I assure you. Nothing to do with gout, sir. No, sir, no; nothing whatever."

* * * *

"Effie, I wonder what made Lattimer always dress so badly? He looks to-day quite the gentleman. On the whole, I am not sorry for what I have done." Pity that Miss Margaret could not hear those words which fell from Sir George as he dropped into his seat. And yet if she had, she would have shivered to think of Sir George's feelings if he should ever guess or discover the source of the only new gentlemanliness the curate had to-day put on.

Mr. Lattimer stood in the garden after the carriage had rolled away, wiping his brow. He felt he could not go into the house again immediately. He wanted the feeling of reality, the fresh air, the starry skies, the solid earth. Was all this true? Was he the rector of his own beloved parish? Fixed for life in comfort there, where all his affections, aspirations were also fixed? He turned to walk round the basement of the house amongst the wet, rustling laurels. His heart was growing

too full. He wanted to get back into the shade of his old thoughts and old feelings, in order to examine closely the change that had come to him, and see that it was really good; for in the house, in the midst of his happiness, the glare was too much for him; he did not know himself. So he walked round between the evergreens and the house. As he walked he suddenly saw a light across his path. He looked up; it was from a window. He only gave one glance into it, then turned quickly away. Yes, quickly, and with eyes full of tears.

What had he seen? Why, only a black kneeling figure with two fair arms locked round it, and a stream of light hair. Only that! But, coming upon him suddenly thus, when he was trying to get out of the too vivid sunshine of his prosperity, it was almost too much for the strong man. He hurriedly walked away further round the house. Another light across his path! Again he looked upward, but this time he was obliged to shade his eyes with his hand. The French windows stood open wide. Was it a picture in a dream he saw

within that room—those children standing there, so strangely resembling his own children, except that they were silent and awed? He stepped in, like a moth that could no longer resist the fascination of the glare. At the moment he was caught sight of by the scared and wondering little things, they set up a great shouting and clapping of hands; for all that which had seemed like a wild dream before became at the sight of papa a sure reality.

"Who brought you here?" he said, his voice more agitated than it had yet been.

"Harry Vaughan sent for us directly you and Maggy had gone, papa. He wanted a grand lady to see us."

The Rev. Mr. Lattimer understood then how his new curate had been plotting to spare Miss Effie the pangs of a refusal, while intending by her and the children's visit to the hall to bring things to a climax, if she had not saved him the trouble.

END OF FACE TO FACE.

# A QUARTER TO TEN.

"WHAT! feeling in *your* pocket, Ferrers!" said Mr. James, after we had all thanked the curate for his little story. "Surely no one can suspect *you* of writing tales!"

"No, no, not exactly, Hilman; not exactly," the lawyer said, laughing and shaking his head, as he pulled out a litter of papers and letters that would have covered half the bed. "No, no, but I've got something somewhere. Ah, here it is! There, look at that, Martin. I came upon it this morning, tied up in a bundle of love letters, in a chest full of dry business documents, leases, bills, and things that I have had to look over. It's a curious sort of paper, isn't it?"

We all went close to the bed to look at it as Martin held it in his hand. It seemed to be

four or five sheets of closely written paper, folded up like a letter, very yellow, and worn, and on the outside there were just four words of writing, which had turned grey, "To Christina: a Confession."

Martin turned it over and over as if he were really curious to know what it was about. Presently he held it out to the lawyer, and said—

"Will you read it? I can't see here."

"You read it, Cheriton," said the lawyer to our curate, who was still listening, with a blush on his bald head, to Mistress Sicklemore's remarks on his nice reading of the story. "You read it, Cheriton; I shall be sure to give it a savour of the Criminal Court."

Mr. Cheriton, who was seated between the housekeeper and the lawyer, wheeled back his chair, and with a wave of his hand and a bow, and a very neatly turned compliment to Mistress Sicklemore's voice, said that he should not think of reading it, while there was a hope that she might be prevailed on to do so.

I hoped she would say yes, and then Martin

would get reading and music at the same time; for the parson was right, she had indeed a voice, clear as a bell, and with a sweet turn in it that took you unawares. I'ud sooner any day have had a scolding from our old housekeeper, than a song from the finest singer in the world. Ah, Joan Sicklemore! Joan Sicklemore! we jogged along so cosily at the Manor-house, who 'ud have thought that the very rheumatism you gave me flannel for was perhaps laid in in those long nights of heartache in the wet fields, and the long May mornings at the stile, waiting for the sound of your swinging pail and your merry song; we that could take our dish of tea together now, and quarrel about which of our two old heads was the grayest, to think that once upon a time, if only the brim of her hat touched my shoulder as we raked the hay, my heart worked in me like a blacksmith's hammer. Ah, Joan, Joan! She makes a kind old lady in her mittens and her cap, but she was a cruel jade, a cruel little jade at seventeen.

There, hang the woman! where was I? O

yes, Mistress Sicklemore took the lawyer's little packet with a curtsey and a pleasant smile, and unfolded it very gently, as if she feared the yellow paper would crumble into dust at a rough touch; and when she had rubbed her spectacles, and asked leave of us all by a smile to begin, she read the unknown's confession, while Martin's eyes were by this time almost glued to the clock, whose tick-tick seemed to grow louder and louder in a kind of triumph as Martin's pulse grew more and more weak, a thing that I could plainly see by the increasing pallor of his face whenever I caught his fingers dabbling, as I have said, with his wrist, half under the bedclothes.

And this is what Mistress Sicklemore read:—

# TO CHRISTINA:

## A CONFESSION.

Christmas Eve, Midnight.

One person alone, besides my mother, knows what I am now going to tell you. If I could speak to you on such a theme, I would not commit to paper the records of my shame. Burn these sheets when you have read them. I have been sufficiently punished; do not let me risk the danger of my future being again compromised by their existence.

Yesterday, the twenty-third day of December, I, Paul Hayden, was sitting at my desk in the counting-house of Messrs. Klop, Son, and Klop, foreign merchants. There was a good deal to do during the evening, as we were accustomed on

the day of Christmas-eve to break up early. Every footstep that crossed the counting-house, or moved in the outer office, seemed light and elastic, and had a kind of enjoyable frosty creak in its sound. There was a something in the pure air of the night, and in the anticipations of the coming festival, which completely changed the aspect of affairs in the ordinarily dull atmosphere of the counting-house, making grim old "senior" clerks light and frisky, and young "junior" clerks staid and painstaking, as they saw that a little hard work now alone interposed between them and the coming revels.

As for me, I sat there with my pen in my hand, and the ledger open before me, bowed down by such a weight of shame and self-reproach as I had never dreamed of falling to my lot. There were my fellow-workmen moving about light-hearted and hopeful; there was I with ruin—almost certain ruin—staring me in the face. Once I felt as in a dream; but no: there lay the letter before me, and I took it up and read it once again.

"Dear old fellow,

"Codd won't renew the bill on any terms. What's to be done? If something is not thought of, and quickly too, you'll see him at Klop's to-morrow morning, sure as fate. I'm deucedly sorry for you, but I can't help you: not the remotest chance of that. Turn it over in your mind. I'll be on the bridge as you go home.

"Yours ever,

"ARTHUR GLYNNE."

Turn it over! And what good would that do? How was a poor fellow like me to scrape together a hundred pounds? Yes, my dear friend, Arthur Glynne, who had so kindly introduced me to all the delights of London, initiated me in all its tempting mysteries, paid for me, quarrelled with me if I remonstrated against his liberality, and laughed at me if I tried to withdraw from such a life of flowery degradation; this all-bountiful friend had suddenly come down upon me one month before with a request (that my obligations had made irresistible) that I would accept for

him a bill of a hundred pounds, and leave him to provide for it when due. I am sure he had meant to fulfil his promise. But Fortune did not hold Arthur Glynne in such deep respect as to trouble herself in the least about giving him the means of fulfilling his obligations; and so I was left in the lurch.

What was I to do? The first sight of that bill would, in Mr. Klop's eyes, have been about the same thing as the last sight of me. And if I left him in disgrace, there was an end to my mercantile career. Should I confide the whole to my mother?—which meant, should I let her know what a recklessly-profligate life I had been leading since our arrival in London, and my meeting with Glynne? Should I open to her the vista of my recent experience during the secret hours of night? Should I dash to the ground the hopes she was fondly nursing of my advancement?

Despairing of any solution, I determined to meet Glynne and tell him so.

I shut up the ledger, put it away in its place,

and proceeded to exchange my office-coat for my walking one.

"Going, Mr. Hayden?" inquired our cashier, Mr. Sampson Boyce, who did not, I fancied, at all participate in the slight signs of satisfaction that Mr. Klop had occasionally exhibited towards me.

"Yes, sir; good night," I answered, as I went out.

I hurried along the noisy streets, with their glaring Christmas-lighted shops, gliding like a spectre through the crowds, never slackening my pace till I reached the foot of the bridge, when a thought struck me, as with a blow of paralysis; I had left Glynne's letter in my office-coat! With moist and trembling hands, which I vainly tried to keep steady, I searched my pockets over and over, then began to run back, but again stopped, incredulously, to make sure. It was too true; I had left it behind; might even have dropped it on the floor while changing coats. I hurried back to the office. The door to the counting-house was down a little court or archway. I

tried it. It was locked. I went round to the dwelling-house, determined that nothing less than sheer impossibility should prevent my getting back my letter. I knew the way into the counting-house from Mr. Klop's house, and that if I could only escape notice from the domestics first, and then from the cashier, and Denning, the watchman, there would be no one else likely to see me. At the worst, I could ask permission to go through to the office. I was fortunate—the street-door was open. I slipped through the passage, and was safely in the business premises. Through the glass-door of Denning's little room I saw Mr. Boyce reading a newspaper. So, then, he had done with the business of the office, and was probably just going. I heard Denning's footstep moving heavily to and fro in the store-room above. I walked cautiously along the passage till I came to the counting-house. The door was open. I went in, glancing hurriedly about on the floor, but seeing nothing of my letter. The first touch of the pockets of my office-coat told me it was not there. I turned

the pockets inside out. No, there was no letter in them. Had Boyce found it accidentally, or Mr. Klop, or had some one suspected me, and searched my coat when I went away? The suspense was intolerable. Suddenly I remembered that on one occasion I had slipped the letter between the pages of the ledger when Mr. Boyce had appeared at the door; but I felt almost certain that I had not left it there. I took down the ledger, however, and with a bounding heart saw the missing sheet drop to the ground. For a moment I felt rather as though my troubles were gone, than that their mere exposure was delayed, as I tore up Glynne's letter, and consumed the pieces by the single gas-lamp that was left burning low till the watchman came for his last survey. As I turned to find my way back, I heard Denning coming down stairs. "Well," I thought, "if he comes in I will tell him I passed through the house without meeting any one, to fetch something I had left behind: but if he passes on I will not unnecessarily make him aware of my presence." He did pass on, and presently I heard

him descending the stairs to the underground storeroom.

As I stood there listening, where I had then no right to be, no wonder I felt like a criminal, and that strange and unpleasant thoughts should begin to pass through my mind. Dark, vague suggestions, the true nature of which I shrank from grappling with, began to stir me; and I felt as if my hair were lifted in horror. I gazed cautiously round. I believe I had at that moment no defined idea beyond the simple one of seeking security from the apprehension that some one might have seen me enter and burn the letter—nay, might even now be watching me. Anxiously I gazed around. Behind, through the glass door of the counting-house, I could see all over and through the large office, with its shadowy-looking rows of desks and stools, made dimly visible by the low, smouldering kind of light. Before me was Mr. Klop's private room. The door was left ajar. Was he there? No, all was silent! But I must make sure. I pushed the door back, and was startled by the flood of

moonlight in which I was suddenly plunged. I advanced, half believing that I was simply fascinated by the splendid natural and artificial scene beyond, which was visible through the broad window. There was a piece of the great black city spread out, low and far, in the vivid, frosty moonlight; the glittering river curving amid blackened buildings; the arches of the bridges almost changing from semicircles to circles by the junction of bridge and reflection below; and a sky of glassy blue, thickly crowded with stars, each apparently emulous to outshine its neighbour in size and brilliancy, and draw to itself every wandering earthly eye. That end of the room was light enough to see to read. I could discern the spots of ink upon the floor. I could see the brass-work of the iron safe. I could see —what? Yes, I write to confess, not to evade, my guilt. I could see, Christina, a something that made my heart throb with violence, even while I knew well enough there had been in it a feeling of roused expectation, as though I had been led there by friend or foe, for some purpose

which I should not long mistake. My hand, as I looked, dropped on the neighbouring desk for support to my frame. Yet I did not turn away, as I ought to have done, either in pure innocence of heart, or with a sense that I had in thought sinned for a moment, but had fled in horror from the temptation, to repent, and to be warned ever after of the danger of one moment of criminal weakness. No; I continued to gaze as in a kind of hideous fascination. It seemed to me not a simple key in that lock, but the curving finger of some demon that I was bound to obey. "Pay the price of your enjoyments now," I thought I heard it saying to me. "Fool you cannot escape, or, if you can, this is the only way. Show some courage, some manliness—do boldly what must be done! If it will be any comfort to you, we'll say this shall be the only time. Ay, swear it if you like! Am I not here to register your oath? We understand. Only this once!"

Still I moved not—only helplessly gazed. My ears now became filled with other sounds and voices. I heard Mr. Klop dismissing me, amid

the contemptuous and indignant murmurs of the clerks. I felt the touch of arrest on my shoulder, and the low murmur in the ear implying that my very body was become the property of another. I heard the heartbroken cry of my mother as the double news of my imprisonment and dismissal reached her. And still the demon beckoned me, as though these were all but tributary influences which he had evoked to show me how useless and unmanly was my hesitation. That curved, shining finger (so strangely lifelike in its form under the moonlight's partial gleam) drew me towards it, and I heard its voice saying, "Come! It is the only way. Hasten! Save yourself!" "No! Fly! It is ruin!" cried another and opposing voice. And then it too murmured, like an echo, "Save yourself!"

But that last voice was so small, and so far off, and the previous one so loud and near—and then that beckoning finger was so easy to touch, and promised so much of instant advantage from its mystery, that even as I gazed, incapable to determine what I would do, *I had done all—*

committed myself to that from which life will never again allow me to be dissevered.

Spare me, Christina, for an instant. I will go on again calmly soon, if you can feel interest in me any longer.

Well, I resume:—The cold steel, as I touched it, sent a shiver through my frame, but I turned the key with a desperate hand, opened the door, and looked in. I could just dimly see a drawer full of gold; my first touch was of a batch of filmy, rustling paper—all bank-notes. I took out two, and held one of them up to the light of the moon. I could just make out the word "Hundred," and was about to put the others back and hurry away, when my Familiar whispered me, "Fool, you will never prosper in this mode of life if you begin so badly. What good will that do you? Where can you change it? Take gold!" Hastily I replaced the notes on the heap, and plunged my hand into the drawer where the gold was, trying to guess as well as I could how far such a handful would go towards a hundred sovereigns. And here let me laugh at a delicate

piece of casuistry with which I amused myself. Even then I could not, I thought, take one sovereign more than my indispensable need required. O, not for the wealth of worlds! Pity my employer had not been by to recognise as it deserved such sublime self-abnegation! So I counted the gold, tremulously, yet determinedly, to the end of the hundred, perfectly conscious that every second thus spent was enhancing my danger, but also conscious that I was laying up one bit of comfortable hypocrisy for the future that might be found very necessary for my peace.

The gold was mine. My bill should be duly honoured. "Honoured!" O God, how my own word pierced me like an ill-carried weapon! Psha! These were trifles now. I groped my way out of the room and along the passage; saw Joyce still over his newspaper, in Denning's room; staggered out by the way I had entered; opened silently the street-door, which had been closed since I had passed through; and then, unchallenged by a single voice, slunk away by

dark courts and by-passages to keep my appointment.

I reached the bridge. I leant against the wall. I tried to realise a single moment of joy at my success—the success for which I had bid so high a price. "I am saved!" I cried inwardly; "saved!" Just then I heard a sound which shook my very soul. It was but a church clock across the river, striking: but to me it was like a voice crying through the midnight, "Lost!" And immediately one clock after another took up the sound, until it seemed to me that angel voices —some thrillingly sweet, some mournful and beseeching, some solemn and denouncing—were crying to me from all parts of the universe, "Lost! lost! lost!" The river, the black city, faded from my view beneath that glorious sky. I saw an old village, every spot of which was familiar to me. I seemed to stand no longer on that bridge, but was kneeling in a well-known room, with my face raised to that sky in prayer. I clasped my hands, my lips moved. I had a delicious feeling of rest. Once more I was

a little child going to lie down in my bed without a care. I heard a footstep; gradually as it approached nearer it recalled me to myself—myself! Good God! was that poor, miserable, shrinking being Paul Hayden? That ——!

Spare me yet, Christina, one weakness. Do not ask me to brand myself once more with the word; it has burnt in too deeply, and needs rather anodynes and rest. Yes, spare me now and for ever the word. I know I cannot escape the thing.

What should I do? Again came that perilous question. How had I answered it before? The weight in my pockets, heavy enough to drag down a thousand souls, was my answer. I thought once I would leap into the river, and let that weight bear me down to a grave so deep that I might hope there to be insensible even to my shame. Then my clenched hands would rise convulsively and desperately in mortal agony against my breast, asking again, "What shall I do?"

Knowing not, seeing no path open to go back,

yet shrinking more and more every moment from the thought of going forward, I suddenly—obeying some impulse I hardly understood, perhaps one of desire for physical relief—began to run. Presently I fancied I caught a glimpse of Glynne approaching to meet me. I turned and ran in an opposite direction to that of his coming footsteps; it seemed to me as though I were flying not so much from him as from myself—from the new and hideous form I had taken—knowing not yet which would prove to be the true Paul Hayden.

When I stopped running it was in the court outside the office. How I came there I know not, unless drawn by the same power that I have heard often moves murderers to haunt the spot where they shed the blood of their victim, and where they are at length to find the ministers of retribution.

"Is it too late?" I asked, under my breath, sinking down on some steps in a dark corner near the counting-house. "Is it too late even now to right myself? Yes! it is impossible—

hopeless!" Thus I despairingly cried; but the hope grew and grew until it became a strong, yearning, passionate desire to try. If that gold were only back again how light every other trouble would be—how quietly I could go home and sleep! I rose from the steps filled with a wild, feverish resolution. "I will do it, so God help me!" I cried, and went round to the front door. It was locked. O the misery of that moment! I wrung my hands in silent despair, and went back to the court. I glanced eagerly at the three lower windows on that side. The one nearest the steps was open—wide open—left so, perhaps, for a few moments, by the watchman, in order to sweeten the offices after putting out the gas. But, if so, he was not far off. He would probably see me if I ventured. Well, I must risk that. By ascending the steps I fancied I could reach it. It was soon done, my arm stretched across, the window-sill grasped, and I had pulled myself up and dropped lightly inside. I looked through the counting-house door. As far as I could see, everything remained as when I

had left it; no one was there. I went in, opened the safe, and with trembling hand put back the hated gold, trying to let it mingle with the rest without noise. O how anxiously I searched my pockets to be sure that not one solitary piece was left behind by accident! It gave me a fresh alarm the mere thought. With a more grateful sound than before the key turned in the lock, and I groped my way from the room and gained the window without hearing the slightest noise to disturb me. Once out in the cold night again, my only feeling was to get away as fast as I could. Then came blessed relief—my heart was brimful of intense thankfulness.

As I was walking rapidly across the bridge, some one slapped me on the shoulder. I looked round, saw it was Glynne, and shrunk from him, perhaps rather roughly; if so, the roughness was not intentional.

"What's the matter now?" said he. "Why, Hayden, you've been drinking. It was a fool's trick to get yourself in this state just now. I suppose you had better go home, and I'll come

and see you before breakfast. Only it's driving it desperately close."

"Look here, Glynne; answer me this. Have you any notion of what you have paid for me since I have been in London?"

"Pooh! you don't know what you're talking about."

"I beg your pardon, I do. Can you answer me?"

"Well, I should rather fancy not. How on earth should I know?"

"Would that bill be about it?"

"Humbug! What's the good of asking me? Yes, more."

"Very well, then. That I take into my own hands. From this day I owe you nothing. Good night!" I held out my hand. As he took it, I said:—

"Don't let's meet again, Glynne, not at present; I don't care if we never do."

He drew himself up, stared at me, took his cigar from his lips, laughed a low forced laugh, turned lightly on his heel, and walked away.

I went home; sorry to have so parted, but glad of the parting itself, and too weak myself to dream of strengthening him.

I sat down by the fireside with the miserable task before me of telling my mother about the bill, but I felt it was the only thing to save her as well as myself from disgrace. She was more cheerful than I had seen her for some time, but her first words were most unwelcome to me in my present condition.

"Christina is in London, Paul. She will perhaps be here to-morrow."

This was indeed an unpleasant surprise to me —she who had known me as I once was—she coming to witness my disgrace. That decided me. I must tell my mother all about it. In a few words I prepared for the worst, and then told her all—*all*, Christina.

When I had said what I had to say from beginning to end, my head dropped on her shoulder, and relief, indescribable relief, was mine. For some time we were both silent. At length she spoke:—

"Paul, you know what my property is—five hundred pounds. I will pay your bill. But, O my boy, do not deceive me! Tell me the worst. Will Mr. Klop, indeed, find that hundred pounds there that you say"—— She did not need to finish the sentence. I understood her but too well. After the revelation I had made she had no longer faith in me or in my word. My act was already pursuing me—here, where I thought myself most safe. I rudely pushed her away, and hurried to my bed, at once stung by her doubts and terrified by the new alarm she had conjured up. As I weighed it, an almost superstitious dread possessed me that her words betokened some further consequence yet undreamed of by me. "What if it should not be there!" I cried out in my anguish; "who would then believe me, if she does not?" I spent a terrible night. When I lay awake the darkness seemed full of beckoning, shining, fingers, in the shape of keys; when I slept I dreamed I was dropping from some enormous height, or flying across some interminable bridge. In the pale, wintry, dawn

of morning I rose. I started to meet my own face in the glass. It spoke truly; I *had* grown years older during that night.

I would not trust myself to meet my mother at breakfast, and left the house without seeing her. By the time I had arrived at the office I felt unable to look any one in the face. As I turned my back to hang up my coat, I said, as usual, "Good morning, gentlemen."

I listened breathlessly. My hand paused with the uplifted coat. No, there was no answer; there was not a sound in the room but the scratching of pens. I looked round. This was folly. Every one was quietly engaged in work. My own voice must have died away before it left me. I had nothing but myself and my own fears to be afraid of.

I had tried hard to work, but my ears involuntarily strove to catch every sound, every whisper. The sight of that safe, which I could see from where I sat, when the door was open, turned me sick. I could not help watching Boyce eagerly as he went to open it. What if I had displaced

anything and he should notice it? He opened it. There was no immediate intimation, by his manner, that he saw anything wrong till he began counting, and then I fancied he must be puzzled, he was so long and silent. I wondered; yet what was it to me—what could it be—whether his accounts were right or wrong? There was clearly no trace of my visit left behind. Yet I could not rest. I started at the least sound, and when I saw Mr. Klop's shining bald head and silver hair approaching, my heart jumped violently.

"Now, Mr. Boyce," he said, sitting down at the great fire, "I'll just run through the cash balance with you, if you're ready."

"Certainly, sir, certainly," said Mr. Boyce; "I have just a little matter to finish with first; then I'll come to you." So saying, he left the office.

Mr. Klop sat rubbing his hands at the fire waiting for him. Some minutes passed without his return. Mr. Klop looked impatiently once towards the door. Still he came not. At length

Mr. Klop rose, went to the outer office, and called,

"Mr. Boyce!"

"He has gone out, Sir," said one of the clerks.

"Gone out!" cried Mr. Klop, "Why, what can have induced him to go out just as I told him I wanted him?"

He went back impatiently into his room.

Every circumstance, however slight, now oppressed me. What did Boyce's absence mean? Had he gone to fetch a constable before even letting Mr. Klop know he had cause for suspicion?

No—no; there was a something in the cashier's manner that I could not read in that way. There seemed almost a kind of new and sympathetic tie between us, which made me shudder, in that aspect and manner of his.

And then, trying to relapse into the thoughts of my safety, and of Christina, and of my mother —and of that dinner I was to eat by Mr. Klop's hearth in the evening—I felt there hung over me yet a kind of imposture. I was not what I

seemed, and might for that reason be again tempted by those secret influences that seem to lie in wait for such prey. I had been all the morning weighing over a certain idea, alarming to dwell on, requiring more courage to pursue than I dared dream of possessing, dismissed many times, yet always coming back—"Paul, Paul, do not eat that dinner; go not *there* while you remain *thus*. Take heart; you know what you ought to do. Go, while it is certain there is time."

My knees knocked together, my lips seemed glued, my fingers like those of a dead man, as I slipped from my stool, strode to the mantel-piece, and drank off a whole glass of water before going up to Mr. Klop's door. I tapped, and, without waiting for an answer, walked straight into his room. I suppose I tried to speak at first, and that he did not hear me, for he said impatiently—

"Speak louder, Paul. What is it?"

"I should like to speak to you, Sir, in private."

"Eh! Oh, certainly." He got up, came past

me, and closed the door; then reseated himself. I began to speak, desirous naturally to make the best of so bad a job, but the tones were unsteady, and I could only get out words enough to show the bare dry truth, without the slightest circumlocution or colouring.

"Sir, I had a letter last night telling me I should be arrested to-day for a debt of a hundred pounds. I left that letter here accidentally, and, fearing you or some one might find it, I returned. I saw your room open, your key in the safe; I robbed you of a hundred pounds."

I stopped, for my voice grew more and more hoarse and unsteady, and my heart was beating with frenzied violence.

"Well?" said Mr. Klop, eyeing me sternly.

"I could not keep it, Sir. I climbed in at the lower passage-window opening into the court, and put it back. You will find it there. My life is a burden to me with this untold."

"Is this true, young man?—And the whole truth?"

"All! on my soul, Sir."

Mr. Klop rose, passed by me to the door, opened it, and called out, "Has Mr. Boyce returned?"

"Yes, Sir," answered one of the clerks.

Mr. Boyce now presented himself, bathed in perspiration, and breathless; facts which he vainly strove to conceal under the guise of his ordinarily quiet, almost sullen, behaviour.

"A customer, Sir, drew me out while talking. And I forgot to say there is a gentleman outside asking to see you on particular and pressing business. He is watching for some one to pass. He said he must go if you did not see him instantly."

"Let him go then, and to the Devil if he likes! Now, Mr. Boyce, just look to the cash, and see if it's all right. I left my key in the safe last night, and should like to be satisfied that nothing wrong has happened in consequence."

"Yes, Sir;"—and Mr. Boyce looked strangely irresolute as he came in, glancing uneasily behind him, yet warned by Mr. Klop's searching eye, which was becoming decidedly unpleasant.

Mr. Boyce went to the safe, opened it, and drew the iron door towards him—perhaps accidentally—but it would have had the effect of concealing the upper part of his body from us where we stood, only that Mr. Klop moved a little—and that, too, might have been accidentally—and then the door was almost ostentatiously thrown back.

A pause of a minute or two now ensued. Presently Mr. Boyce said, with a quivering voice, quite unlike his usual harsh, unfeeling tone, "Why, why, Sir! Mr. Klop, some one has been here! There is I believe—nay, I am sure—a hundred pounds missing! Stay; I will count again." And he did so, not turning for a moment to look on us.

Our eyes met—Mr. Klop's and mine. It was an awful meeting. He doubted me—that was the expression I saw there. I answered him with a quiet but steady look, earnestly yet mutually appealing. He understood, I thought, and waited.

As for me, however calmly I was able to bear

myself, I saw there was a frightful gulf yawning beneath my feet.

Very rapidly I ran over all the possibilities of this new calamity—retraced every foot of ground, and every minute of time, belonging to the sickening experience of the past night. I saw but one solution—too fantastic to be credible, yet the only one my agitated mind could guess at and rest upon. Was Boyce a rogue? Had he seen me either steal into Mr. Klop's room last night, or out of it when he was reading the paper in Denning's room? Had he secretly gone after me to the safe, discovered the theft, and, instead of denouncing it, determined to profit by it, sure that the thief would be made answerable for all, and disbelieved even if discovered, and if he should deny that he had taken more than the one hundred pounds? If so, one thing was clear—he would sacrifice me to clear himself.

"Yes, Sir," he said, now turning round upon us a face whiter—so it seemed to me—than the whitest of sepulchral walls, "there is a hundred pounds missing."

"And can you, Boyce, guess how?"

"Well, Sir, that is a serious question to answer. I fear I can. Last night, when every one was gone, I thought I saw a shadow pass the little window of Denning's place. It was gone before I could get out. I looked into your room here, but saw nothing in particular to alarm me."

"Not the key in the safe?"

"No, Sir, I did not notice it."

"Indeed!" said the merchant, "and did you notice anything?"

"I did, Sir. I picked up this on the floor."

He produced a crumpled playbill. As he opened it, I saw in large letters, "Don Giovanni." I knew it. It indicated the latest of the many visits Glynne and I had made together to the Opera.

"Do you know who could have dropped it?"

"I will answer that question, Sir," said I. "I have no doubt I did, if it was really found there."

"*If* it was? Would you dare, Sir, to suspect Mr. Sampson Boyce, the cashier of Klop, Son,

and Klop, of an untruth? uttered, too, for the ruin of another? Young man, beware! *This* is no play," said Mr. Klop, with a strange gleam in his eye.

I trembled, yet looked up with a certain confidence. God help me, I felt almost innocent just then. Mr. Klop's eye passed from Boyce to me, from me to Boyce, before he again spoke.

"Well, Mr. Boyce, I and Paul have already had some talk: he knows he is under suspicion. By-the-bye, who was the customer, Mr. Boyce, that took you into the street a little while ago—kept you so long, and sent you back in such hot haste?"

There was the slightest possible pause.

"I really don't know his name, Sir. I have seen him in the warehouse over and over again, but cannot remember to have ever heard it."

"And when you came back, who was the gentleman who wanted me so pressingly to come out?" said Mr. Klop, with that inexplicable gleam once more in his quiet, dangerous-looking eye.

Mr. Boyce attempted a smile: a very ghastly one it was.

"He neither gave me his name nor card, Sir."

"And he said nothing particular to you, except that he wanted me out there?"

"Nothing, Sir."

"Not even that you must get me out of this room at any cost, or you would never be able to replace that hundred pounds out of your pocket, and which you had been home to fetch! Eh?"

Dead silence. I seemed (but it might be fancy) to hear the shaking of the clothes on that collapsing frame.

"Come, Mr. Boyce, enough of this! If I wrong you I will beg your pardon, as a gentleman should, and show you why I came to this abrupt conclusion. Now, Sir, have you not that money in your pocket?"

What a position was mine! To stand there and see this man's guilt strangely and wonderfully brought to light through my guilt, and to know he was every instant getting more hopelessly entangled, and I feeling more and more

free, in spite of my inward prayer to God to prepare me for the worst.

Suddenly he threw himself on his knees before Mr. Klop, and murmured, just above his breath, "Forgive me! It is true. I was tempted. I saw the key in your safe—discovered, as I thought, you had been robbed. I am sure, Sir, there *was* a hundred pounds taken away."

"I could have told you that."

"Indeed, Sir! It was you, then? I am rightly punished! I thought you had been robbed—saw in the playbill a trace of the criminal—and felt assured that if I increased the amount no suspicion would ever attach to me. Mercy!"

"It would be wasted. I can understand a moment of weakness leading to crime in a young, tempted, and inexperienced man; and that the act itself may bring its own warning and cure. But you, Sir, must be corrupt at heart—must have through life fenced yourself round with lies, and have been only unexpectedly surprised into a true self-revelation. Go! I have no more to say."

A few minutes more and I saw two constables enter, and the gold taken from Boyce's pockets, which he had evidently determined to restore the moment he had, or fancied that he had, discovered no theft had been committed, but had been denied all opportunity. Without a word more he left the room in the custody of the men.

I sank down in a chair, heedless of Mr. Klop's presence, my very soul faint.

"Young man," he said to me soon, and in a voice so strangely sweet that the tears bounded forth to greet it, "you have sinned, repented, and made prompt restitution. You can do no more now. I wish it had been otherwise. But I forgive you. In time I may be able to trust you if you deserve it."

He would not turn me off, then. O God! that I might have shown him what I felt! But I restrained myself, and I have no doubt he liked me the better for so doing.

"Paul, no one knows but myself. No one shall know."

I could only look and bow, in silent gratitude.

"You will dine with me, as you had intended?"

"No, no, sir."

"Why? It will divert suspicion."

"Oh, Sir, my heart is too full. God forgive me; it would seem a kind of triumph."

"You are right. Go at once. I will look to the affair of the bill, and see how to help you, without altogether sheltering you from your just responsibilities. Good-by; give me your hand; pleasant Christmas to you!"

Christina, I have told all to my mother. I cannot eat to-morrow's dinner till I have also told you. Now, if you wish it, I release you from your engagement.

PAUL HAYDEN.

Let the last of these pages bear witness that I will never comply with the request made in them; never will I burn them, never will I part with them, never shall eye see them while we two live. When we are dead, the revelation under other names will not matter to us, and may help those who are in danger.

CHRISTINA HAYDEN.

# HALF-PAST TEN.

"Ay, and she died last week," said Lawyer Ferrers, as good Mistress Sicklemore wiped a few honest tears away. "She died last week, after having been a widow two years."

"Bless me," cried old Mr. Cheriton, starting up as he looked at his watch; "it's half-past nine, I declare, and my sister has some friends this evening."

The lawyer said he would ride home with him as far as he could; for he, too, had stayed later than he ought, and must be going.

"I think we have got over the day very well, Matthew, under your management," he whispered to me, as the housekeeper went out to order their horses. "I suppose he will settle to sleep now?"

I had little hope of that, but it was no use saying anything, for they had done their best; besides, Martin, I could see, was getting tired of them, so I let them go without a word.

Now, while the confession was being read, I had noticed two things. One was that Mr. James's face changed colour several times; and once when Mistress Sicklemore read how young Paul stood leaning on the bridge, and the thought came to him of trying to go back from his crime, Mr. James turned round and gave me a look, sharp and suspicious, as if he thought the reading of this had been planned by me for some purpose.

The other thing I noticed was, that Martin, while he lay still, listening to Mistress Sicklemore with the greatest attention, was evidently watching me. I couldn't look at Mr. James but what I felt Martin's bright, restless eye following mine, or looking at me as if he would read my every thought.

After the gentlemen had gone, he seemed to forget all about us, and his nervous fit came on

him again; but even with that, I thought I noticed some change for the better; he took care not to look at the clock or touch his pulse when he thought we saw him, and seemed angry when Mr. James or any of us spoke of the dreaded time being nearly over.

Mistress Sicklemore wanted to have the windows closed up, but Martin would not have it done, I think to assure us that he had no manner of fear. I said, if they were to be open, I would go round the grounds to make sure the great gates and the field-gate had been safely locked, but Mr. James told me he should never rest unless he went himself to-night, so I need not trouble.

By-and-by he went, and Mistress Sicklemore went too, to see to the house fastenings; and just as they closed the door after them, Martin laid his thin hot hand on mine, and said, in a voice faint with terror again—

"What is the matter with you all? What is this locking-up and extra care about? What do you and James look at one another and turn

pale about? Are you all bewitched by this gipsy cant? What is it, I say?"

"Tut—tut, Mr. Martin," said I; "there's nobody bewitched but yourself that I know of. They see you lie there persuading yourself that something's going to happen, and of course they humour you."

"Matthew, who are you speaking to? It's no such thing, and you know it; you are all expecting something. I've seen James turn as white as a sheet half-a-dozen times this evening. But come, I'll have no more of this. Let me get up. I'll not lie here any longer; it's enough to drive one mad; give me my clothes, and let me get up."

I did, and helped him, half pleased and half frightened; but he had more strength than I expected.

When Mr. James came back with the keys in his hand, he looked so astonished, that Martin was annoyed.

"Do put off that long face, James," he said, "and tell Mrs. Sicklemore to bring some wine.

Nobody would think it was my birthday; and, Matthew, you've vexed me to-day two or three times, but you shall have your ale here if you like, and drink my health."

I thanked him, and in a few minutes we really looked very comfortable. We had drawn Martin's easy chair just inside the door of the long room, and pulled the table up to it, and the sound of the fountain through the window was pleasant enough. There was no moon, but the stars were so thick, they seemed to be looking over one another's shoulders; and now and then a sheet of white summer lightning covered the lawn and trees, and flashed on the old armour that hung on the walls of the long room.

I now noticed that Mr. James was getting more restless and fidgetty than his brother. Every harmless gleam of lightning made him start, and spill his wine; nor could he bear to sit with his back to the window an instant. Once, when he got up, I saw him take one of the pistols out of the case and lay it on the table beside him; and when he saw that

Martin was looking at him, he said, trying to smile—

"It will hurt nobody lying there, and you *will* have the window open."

Martin leaned back in his chair, without making him any answer; but I could see, by his paleness, and his glancing at the clock, that this move of Mr. James's had done him no good, whatever it was intended for. I asked him again, should I shut the windows; and again he answered angrily, and with a suspicious look—

"No."

Though Mistress Sicklemore tried for a long time to keep up a little chit-chat with me about the state of the fruits for preserve, and one thing and another, somehow we all fell into silence again, and the silence of a hot August night is like no other kind of silence.

I began to wish Martin safe in bed again, for sometimes he seemed as if he had no power to sit upright in his chair; and now that he was near enough to the clock to *see* the hand go from second to second, he never took his eyes off it.

I got anxious for him again; and as for Mistress Sicklemore, the tears came in her eyes as she looked at him. And she usen't to be so soft of heart at seventeen; no, no, a saucy jade she was, a cruel little jade!

We had been sitting in this way for about half an hour I suppose, listening to the fountain, and starting if one another moved; a sheet of pale lightning was quivering just a thought longer than usual on the lawn, and about the window, when Martin suddenly jumped to his feet, and stood holding by the table edge and staring out into the garden.

"Martin! what? what?" said Mr. James, catching his arm, but not looking towards the window we looked through. I snatched up my stick and went outside, but all was perfectly still, and nothing to be seen but the dark trees and the fountain; and the white little twisting walks about the lawn were as quiet as if no foot had ever touched them.

"What was it, sir?" I said. "There's not a soul about outside."

"He thought he saw a figure on the lawn, Matthew," answered Mr. James. "But if he did, it could only have been Harry or Dick; and the lightning is so deceptive, it was most likely all a mistake."

Martin moved his lips as if he would contradict, but the shock seemed to have taken all his strength away. While we were settling the cushions at his head, I managed to turn his chair round away from the clock.

"Matthew," he said, in a whisper; and I bent my head down. "Matthew, don't do that; wheel me round again. I can have no rest till the time is over, I tell you that now; nothing could alter it, or make it easier for me; but it is very near: not quite an hour and a half; it will soon be over, and then——"

"And then, sir," I said, "we will ring the bells."

He tried to smile, but it was more like a shudder.

"Now, sir," I said, "you mustn't think I don't understand what this hour and half will be to

you—I do very well. I know you're too ill and weak to fight against what you feel, as a strong healthy man might; and when a man has a trouble on him, and is too ill to fight through it, what can he do? Sir, he can keep still, and be led through it by the Hand that, if we only hold by it, will lead us safely over the roughest and darkest bits of life. I knew a man once—you won't remember him, sir—Jerry, ragged little Jerry Rouse, the cobbler; his hand was turned against—ah, it makes my blood run cold to think of that night—but I was going to say, sir, there was a man who was saved by the Hand I'm speaking of, and guided through a sorer trial than yours, Mr. Martin Pole—ay, ay, a sorer trial than yours."

"Tell me about him, Matthew," he said. "I have heard of Jerry Rouse, but I don't remember him. What was it he was going to do?—tell me the story, if you're not too tired." And as he spoke, he seemed suddenly to catch his breath, as if it chilled his very heart's blood to know that he had for an instant forgotten his secret watch. I drew my chair in front of him, that if he got

interested, he might look at my wizen and battered old visage, instead of that fine yellow clock's; and so while the tall trees nodded under the stars, and the lightning by fits made the fountain stand out like a ghost, I told, as fast as I well could, so as to keep hold of him, the story of Jerry and his Haunted Crust.

# THE HAUNTED CRUST.

## CHAPTER I.

### NANCE.

Can't you remember Jerry Rouse, sir, the little cobbler of Pickersgill? How should you, though? Poor Jerry! I suppose his busy little fingers were stiff and cold in his coffin before you saw the light.

It was on a Christmas-eve, forty years ago, that that poor little cobbler, who lies in the churchyard yonder, nothing but senseless dust,—was a piece of living flesh and blood, suffering and shaking under such a temptation, that if I told what it was, and that he gave way to it, there are those who wouldn't let him rest in peace among their

kith and kin—no, not now, though it's forty years ago; they'd go and tear his bones out of their grave this very night—this very instant.

Now, at the time I'm speaking of, the street running down to the river was the High-street of Pickersgill, and what they call the High-street now, was a long, close court, called Gadshill-in-the-Fields. Come, come, Mistress Sicklemore, you're not so young but you remember that, surely? And you remember Jerry, now, I'll be bound. Call him to mind,—a little man, you know, a tiny little man, with coal black eyes and hair, and a pale, sickly, happy little face. Haven't you seen him sitting at the open window of number three, the dirtiest house in the court? Of course you have; and his black-eyed, ragged little children playing outside.

His wife, Nance, was a well-looking body enough in her day, but such a scold, and such a dirty, muddling kind of woman, that if Jerry hadn't had her, nobody else would. She set her cap at me once, did Nance; but there! what kind of cap was it; so black you wouldn't have picked

it up in the street. However, Jerry had a kind heart, you know; and seeing how Nance was getting a longish way on the other side of her teens, and sourer and sourer every day, out of very charity he went to her mother, who was beginning to scout her, and says he—

"Mistress Jessop, will you put in a word for me with Nance? I haven't a farthing till I get paid for heeling these boots in my hand," he says. "I earn my bread from hand to mouth, but I think I could earn Nance's, too, if she'd be so kind as to say yes."

"Do you know what kind of a temper she is?" says Nance's mother.

"Yes, ma'am," says Jerry; "but not having much temper myself, I think we might get along very well."

"Do you know she's the dirtiest thing about a house that ever was?"

"That, ma'am," said Jerry, "is the chief consideration; I know there's not another woman in Pickersgill would put up with my ways in that respect, for I can't abide cleaning, ma'am; wet

boards, and the sight of pails of water about, would be the death of me. So, if you see no objections yourself, and Nance 'ud be so very kind, I think, ma'am, as it 'ud be a very happy union."

And so it was, in Jerry's opinion; and I suppose he was the best judge, wasn't he? Nance Jessop kept to her part in the agreement, at any rate; for a dirtier place than Jerry's little house at Gadshill-in-the-Fields, and dirtier children than Jerry's seven, you wouldn't light on in a month's march.

I say seven, but, now, Jerry's eldest girl was an exception to all the rest. She grew up as fair and clean in all that dirt, as a flower 'll grow up out of the mould that's nourished it. I've looked at her as I've come through the court many a time, and never been able to get her face from before my eye all day afterwards. There 'ud be five black-eyed, big-headed little things moping about in the dirt, some inside the door, and some out, while Jerry sat in his window whistling over his work; and there on the door-

step 'ud be little Mercy. I've seen her sitting there a good many times, yet I've never seen the same look on that child's face twice in my life; she seemed always so different from the others, so busy in her thoughts. I never saw her play, ever since she was out of her mother's arms; she seemed to do nothing but sit and read, and nurse babies on the doorstep.

Once, when I was having a gossip with Jerry —who had his share of tongue, I can tell you— some boys in the court got teasing little hump-backed Tommy, and Mercy's face got quite fierce as she watched them. She asked Jerry to speak to them two or three times, but he always said, "O, Tommy doesn't mind it." So I went myself and sent the boys off, and brought back Tommy to where his brothers and sisters were at play.

"Do you think he does mind it, then?" I said to Mercy.

"I don't know," she said, with a great sigh. "I do. I mind it so much, when they're mocked and pointed at, that I wish they were dead,

and I'm always wishing they'd never been born."

You see, the poor child felt all that Tommy would have felt if he had been right sharp, which he wasn't; and all that Jerry would have felt, if his eyes had been open to the wretched bringing up of his children, which they were not; and all that Nance would have felt if she'd been a different kind of woman; but as for poor Nance, she thought if she clouted them all round once or twice a day, and kept them from getting to any water, she was giving them as good an education as a poor cobbler's children ought to expect.

Well, I went away from Pickersgill for three years or so, and when I came back I found Mercy grown up, and the talk of all the place. Her face was small; not round, nor dimpled, yet not thin-looking, but beautifully soft, and of the same warm whiteness all over; just, perhaps, a little warmer in the middle of the cheeks, as you see a bunch of apple-blossom gets pinker towards the heart. Yes, certainly, if this kind of face, with full

and sorrowful blue eyes, with a blue shadow lying under them, and pinky eyelids heavy with black lashes that seemed always wanting to go to sleep on her cheek, a mouth like two cherries pressing together—if a face like this, set round with rings of chestnuty hair, can make a girl pretty, certainly Mercy had such a one, and must have been called pretty even now; though ideas have changed since the days she used to put the clerks at Flounger's out of their reckoning every time she passed the office-windows.

## CHAPTER II.

### MERCY'S FOUR SWEETHEARTS.

Now, at the time of my coming back to Pickersgill, Mercy had four sweethearts.

There was Smilish, the red-haired herring-man, always sliding in a soft word with his herring, till Jerry was obliged to leave off having them, which was a great privation to the family—herrings, and Smilish's herrings in particular, being cheap just then.

Then, too, there was Felix Hadup, a real gentleman clerk at Flounger's office, who, for the love of Mercy, took to wearing out his boots in quite a wonderful way, so that Jerry always had a pair on hand; and, one day, when a dragoon regiment was billeted on Pickersgill, all the children playing out of doors at Gadshill-in-the-Fields, began to cry and rush home; and Jerry

himself, he tells me, quaked a bit when he looked up and found a great fellow, standing six feet in his boots, before his window, with his face as red as his coat, making a downright honest offer through his great moustache for Mercy, wanting to march her off to Ireland with his regiment next morning. Of course, Mercy was called to speak for herself, through the window; and, poor fellow, as he went back up the court he looked so mild and meek, that, instead of being afraid of him, all the children took hold of hands, and stood in a line staring at him so that he couldn't pass.

He was the third. Well, the fourth was a man, who, of all men in the world, came least to Jerry's fancy, as you may know when I tell you that that man was Dan Harroway—ay, Dan o' the water, Dan himself. You recollect him, ay, ay? There'll be something happen I should think when black-eyed Dan's forgotten in these parts. Ah, talk of your Charlie Steers and your Willie Stackletons of these days—the girls stare after them, it's true—but Dan, dark Dan o' the

water, he was something to stare after, I warrant you. Ah, it's all very well; but, Mr. Martin, begging your pardon, I won't believe your housekeeper there forgets all the heartaches Dan made in Pickersgill among the lasses of her day. Come, come, that's part of my story; you needn't take my ale away for that; there's no danger of Dan now; eh, Mistress Sicklemore?

Well, I suppose there's no occasion for me to tell any of you that Dan wasn't a saint. Though I do say he wasn't worse than Charlie, the waterman, or Will, the horse-breaker. In the first place, he was driven to lead the sort of life he did in a good part by his old miser of a father, who turned him out of doors at sixteen. Then, you know, being such a dare-devil with horses, such a fellow with his oar, and such a little king in his looks, he got soon picked up, and petted, and spoiled, by the sporting gentlemen about here,—ay, and I may say, by more than one sporting lady, too. Why, there was my lady Caperdown, they say, would have married him out-and-out, only she got a shock when Dan took her first

love-letter to her son's valet, thinking it was some order about the stables, and commanded him, like an emperor, to read it to him, as he couldn't either read or write.

How often I've seen him standing in his bright top-boots and scarlet hunting-coat outside here; or in his striped regatta shirt, amongst all the low fellows who seem to grow out of the water at boating times, standing out from them all, as I tell you, like a born king. He had a clear dark skin, with the blood always flushing under it, but never standing florid in his cheeks; curly black hair; and black eyes—not an eye like Jerry's, though it was as black, but not soft, and merry, and contented, but a restless, fierce black eye, that seemed to be always roaming about, looking for something it could never find; and every glance seemed edged and pointed like a steel dart. He had half a score of names—the Little King, the Emperor, the Sultan, Lucifer; and as far as pride and dark good looks went, I must say, he deserved them all, and the last particularly. I think he was prouder to women than to men, and

had need have been if all the tales I've heard were true. I don't mean to say Dan would pass by a pretty girl without looking at her, not he; but if she minced in her walk, and seemed to know he was looking at her, he would stare in his haughty, scornful way, as much as to say, "You needn't put yourself out; I was only thinking you've got decent eyes or a decent figure, and it's a pity the rest of you's not as good;" so that really a girl was as much put out as flattered by one of his looks; and he was so cool and proud with the handsome ladies he rode with, that it got quite a saying in Pickersgill, "No more in love than Dan o' the water."

And now I'm going to tell you about Dan and Mercy's first meeting.

I suppose he had noticed her before. I should think he had noticed her as the prettiest girl in Pickersgill, and as the only girl in Pickersgill who didn't gape after him (present company, Mistress Sicklemore, excepted, of course).

Well, it was one muggy November night, Mercy and little Tommy and I were coming up

the High-street together. I was trying to comfort the poor lass a bit, for times just then were going hard with Jerry; indeed, just then was the coming on of hard times for more than him. We had got to the end of the street, when Dan came flashing round the corner on Richardson's black horse.

"Holloa, Matthew!" he shouts, in his grand, commanding way, stopping close to the pavement, "give me a light, quick; come, man. I've got a seven mile ride—look sharp!"

"Quicker said than done, Dan Harroway, in this wind," says I, taking out my tinder-box.

Dan held his match down while I struck; but the wind blew it out directly it was lighted; so I, stupid-like, asked Mercy to come and hold up her shawl to make shade against the wind. She did come close to the horse, and held up her shawl while Dan bent down, holding the reins and his pipe in one hand, and the match in the other ready to catch the light. It lit and went out half a dozen times, and while I was scraping and scraping away, I knew well enough that Dan was looking

at Mercy; she knew it too, and you would have thought such a girl would have kept her eyes to herself; but whether she got angry or what, Mercy raised hers to Dan's face as it bent down close to her.

Now, I don't know much about love nonsense myself, still I could but feel when Mercy raised her eyes and found Dan's face within a few inches of hers, looking at her as I'd never seen him look at any other woman in his life, his fiery eyes all soft, and seeming to have found somewhere to rest on at last, and his proud-set lips in a smile; when I saw this I say, and saw, too, how he seemed to have the power of holding those sorrowful blue eyes of Mercy's to his like by a charm, I said to myself—"There, you've done something for Jerry, calling her to hold up her shawl, you have; you thought if you couldn't strike one match, you'd strike another. I'm mistaken if this isn't the beginning of trouble."

And so it turned out to be.

Dan may have courted her with his eyes all that winter, for what I know; but I saw nothing

more myself, till one fine morning early in the year. He was riding slowly up the road from Paisley woods, with a bunch of wild blue hyacinths lying on his horse before him, close to the path where Mercy was coming along. I was on the other side: I don't think either of them saw me.

Presently Dan stopped his horse, and stooped and held the flowers out to her, smiling. Mercy stopped and looked at them. No doubt it seemed pleasant to the poor child, who never had time to pick a flower for herself, and who got many a slap from Nance for running to pick up the clover-blooms that fell out of the waggons passing the top of the court; no doubt it seemed very pleasant and tempting to have a bunch of sweet-smelling blue-bells held out to her like that by Emperor Dan. She looked and looked for nearly a minute, and then shook her head, as much as to say "I mustn't," like a child, and began to walk on quicker.

Dan's face darkened, and he turned his horse right across her path, and held the flowers down

to her again, while his black eyes seemed half begging, half commanding her to take them. Then she held out her little hand and took them, still like a child frightened into doing wrong.

Dan pricked his horse, and went galloping up the road.

I never smell hyacinths but I see that old road again, with the light-green hedges and the primroses under them; and Dan turning in his saddle as he galloped away, resting one hand on the horse's back; and his dark face, with the sun on it, smiling bright and proud, like a sultan that had been baulked many times, but got his own way at last, smiling at Mercy while the yellowy-green hedges spun by; and Mercy herself standing just where he had left her, shading her eyes with the flowers, looking after him, ready to cry at what she had done, and yet sick at heart that his horse should bear him so fast out of her sight.

"Trouble coming, Jerry," I said to myself as I saw her. "Trouble coming."

That same morning I had to call on old Harroway, Dan's father, who was my landlord,

you know, and who owned half the wretched houses at Gadshill-in-the-Fields. Dan was in the office, coming out as I went in. I wasn't surprised to see him there, for matters had long been patched up between them; but I was surprised to hear him say—

"What does it matter to you where the money comes from, so long as you get it?"

"I don't know about that," said old Harroway, locking up his tin box. "Jerry's money is honest money when it does come."

"What is mine, then?" Dan said, coming back with a scowl on his face.

"There, there, let it drop," said the old man, pettishly. "You've had your own way, and that's enough; I don't know what you're after, but if you choose to pay me the rent, of course I shan't worry him for it."

"But, mind, the debt goes on just the same," said Dan; "and I take my money back when I like, giving you a week to get it from him."

And Dan went out, just nodding to me; and old Harroway not seeing me yet, looked out of

the grimy window after him, and screwed up his yellow face, and shook his bald head, as much as to say, "Do you think I don't know what you're after, my boy?"

I can tell you I wished no little that I knew; for though I could make neither head nor tail of what I had heard, and wouldn't for the world have made Jerry uncomfortable about it, and so stopped any good Dan in his love for Mercy might be going to do him, still I found myself every time I passed their place croaking like an old raven.

"There's trouble coming, Jerry; trouble coming!"

## CHAPTER III.

### TROUBLE COMES IN TOP-BOOTS.

THAT same year, just a week before Christmas, on a Saturday night, I set off from "The Water Lily" to pay Jerry Rouse a visit. Ay, that was a time that won't be forgotten in Pickersgill for a few years to come, I should say, not by any, at least, who saw what I saw on my walk to Jerry's that Saturday night. Half-dozens and dozens of hungry, ragged men outside bakers' shops, staring as if they'd draw the loaves out with their eyes. Women going from shop to shop, to get the most they could for their few halfpence; and here and there a man carrying a pole with a loaf at the top and a great ticket to show the price and the size together. What did it mean, Mr. Martin? Why, it was the time of the great distress in all the factory places; and at

Pickersgill it was as bad, or worse, than anywhere, and it was the hearing of a sore tale of starvation at Gadshill-in-the-Fields that made me get up from the comfortable fireside of "The Water Lily," and set out on my visit to Jerry.

Now, Saturday night, I should tell you, was not by any means a pleasant time for visiting Jerry. In the first place, Saturday was Nance's washing-day, and you wouldn't be able to move for wet rags of clothes hung on lines across and across the room. It was her cleaning day, too, such cleaning as she did; and you'd be sure to find her broke down in the midst of it, squatting before the fire, railing at Jerry because he wouldn't take the baby, who was always cross on a Saturday night, because the steam of the wet clothes brought his cough on. Jerry himself would be sitting in the corner where Nance had driven him; bending his pale, good-tempered little face over his work; and surrounded by old boots, which the children would be playing with and mauling about so, that when he wanted a left, he

found all rights; or when he wanted a right, all lefts.

That was Jerry's home on that Saturday night; not a very bright one certainly, but a palace to many a home at Gadshill-in-the-Fields.

But now Jerry didn't look upon any of these things as his troubles, but as all Nance's; and listened patiently to her complaining, pitying her from the bottom of his kind, simple heart, and wondering if ever a woman, let her be saint, martyr, or what, had as much to put up with as his Nance.

He had one trouble of his own, though, had Jerry. Where was Mercy these Saturday nights? Tramping through the mud and mire, taking home the work as fast as he could do it? As fast as he could do it: yes; but Mercy was not so quick gone on these errands as she used to be, and poor Jerry noticed it; and had queer uneasy thoughts about it, that made him stick his awl into his thumb sometimes.

And so I found him that Saturday night,

sitting sweating over his work, in the steam and smoke, and pondering these things concerning Mercy.

I made the best of my way among the wet clothes to him, after speaking to Nance and the children.

"Ah, Matthew," he said, with a shake back of his matted hair and a lightening up of his pale face, "all the compliments of the season to you for coming to see us in this family kind o' way. You must take us as we are, you know; we don't make no stranger of you, do we, Nance? Will you clear a chair for Matthew, my dear? and I dare say he'll be so good as to hold the little 'un for you."

"No, thank you, Jerry; I'm much beholden to you, but I'd rather be excused," says I. "Me hold a baby, indeed! No, no; that's a thing I never could do. In the first place, I never can guess how far a child comes down to in its long-clothes; and if you go to stretch your arms out, taking it to be taller than it is, it'll slip through 'em; or if you go to take it by the middle, the

head will hang down and bring on convulsions or something."

So I let Jerry's baby alone, and took a chair, and while I was talking to him stuck my pockets out behind, to show the mince-meat pies and oranges. It wasn't long before they were found out; for soon, instead of fretting and whining, you could hear nothing but sucking and munching all over the room; and then by degrees came the whole lot hanging about my knees, and looking up at me with their big eyes as if I was the most wonderful old boy that ever lived. I don't like children; I never did: but I liked to feel Jerry's children pick my pockets.

"So you've got a new landlord, Jerry?" I said to him.

Jerry looked up from the thread he was waxing, quite astonished.

"Haven't you heard that old Harroway said good-bye to us all last night?" says I.

"No," said Jerry.

"Well, he did; he died at his sister's farm at Bassett."

"And who'll be our landlord now?" asked Jerry.

"Who? Why, who but his son," said I; "young Dan o' the water?"

Jerry laid down the boot he was welting, and sat considering, drawing up his little knees, and winding his piece of waxed thread round and round them.

"Matthew," he said, presently, in a low voice, so that Nance shouldn't hear him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorrier for this yer than I can tell you."

"And why, Jerry?" I asked him.

"Because," says he, taking up his boot again, and sticking it between his knees, sole upwards, and bringing his fist down upon the sole with all his might, "I'd rather Dan Harroway be obligated to me for a sound lickin', than I 'ud be obligated to him for the standin' over of half a year's rent, as 'll have to be the case now. Poor old Harroway, he must have foresaw as his end was nigh, for he's let me alone since the spring, and not worrited me once."

Ay, thinks I, Dan could tell you two stories to that one, but I only said—

"It appears to me, Jerry Rouse, you're a shade *too* hard on that lad—that Dan Harroway; it does, now."

"Well, I'm sorry if I am, and I'm willin' to give him every excuse so long as he keeps out o' my way. He may mend some time or other, but I ain't much hopes myself o' such a character; he's had too much to do with the water for me."

"Why, man alive, what harm could the water do him?" says I.

"What harm?" says Jerry; "why it's my opinion as the first harm that ever was, was washed ashore by water. Ah, it's a queer thing, and it's the greatest pity as is that we can't do without it; but we can't, I suppose. It's one o' the necessities as came to us with the fall o' man. What harm is there in it, indeed? Why, don't you suppose as the sarpint that tempted Adam's missus was a sea sarpint? o' course he was; and I tell you there's no countin' the harm there is in water. Look at yer mud larks, and your river

thieves, and your pierits, and then tell me as there's no harm in water. And this Dan Harroway—why, as I may say, he's been bred to it. I mind him when he come up no higher than my knee, a chippin' little boats out o' nothing one minute, and a pumpin' on hisself in the market-place at Bassett another; and when I saw it, I always said as he'd come to ruin. So he's my landlord, is he? Well, landlord or no landlord, let me catch him making eyes at my gal agen, that's all."

"How do you know but what he means well by her, Jerry?" said I.

"Mean well by her?" says Jerry; "not he. No, no, whatever Dan is, he's a bit above us; though as for Mercy herself, a king might mean well by her, for that matter. She has a face of her own, has Mercy, and a figure too, bless her. As Smilish over the way says (for I can't never go to have a chat with Smilish now but what he begins spelling and speering about her; though, poor chap, he's lived off a herring and a tater this fortnight, they say), 'She's as pretty,' says

Smilish, speakin' o' Mercy, 'as a wilet, and she don't know it no more an a wilet.' No more she don't; but I'll warrant if Dan Harroway sets his evil eye upon her, she'll know it soon enough. Halloa! who's that?"

It was Smilish himself, poking his red head in at the door.

"Talk of angels," said Jerry, "and—but, lor, man, what's the matter with you? Have you seen a ghost?"

"Come here, Jerry Rouse," said Smilish, beckoning with his great hand.

Jerry and I got up and went to the door.

"Look there, Jerry Rouse," said Smilish, dragging him out and pointing up the court.

Now when I tell you the moon was so bright you could see the fish scales sticking to Smilish's red hand as he pointed, you'll see that there was no mistaking two figures which stood by the wall of a half-finished house at the top of the court. In that light, if they belonged to the parish at all, Jerry must know them. They did belong to the parish, and Jerry did know them.

It was Dan and Mercy.

They were holding hands, saying good-bye, as it seemed. We all three stood looking at them a minute or more, then Jerry took up the corner of his leather apron and tucked it in the string that went round his waist, and went up the court to them. His house was number three, you know, so there was but the length of two houses to go.

The two dropped each other's hands as they saw him; Mercy shrank back, but Dan stood up in his boots and faced him like a man.

"Mercy, my gal," said Jerry, laying his hand on her shoulder, and pointing to his wretched little place, "go home," and she went home, and Smilish turned his face away.

Then Jerry turned to Dan, and says he—

"Dan Harroway," says he, "you're my landlord, as I hear, and I'm half a year's rent in your debt; I don't want to see my little ones turned out in the cold without a roof to cover 'em, so I can't say exactly what I should a said to you if to-day had been yesterday. All as I say now is, don't let me catch you talking to my gal agen."

Now I think by Dan's face he was going to make him a quiet answer, but as ill-luck would have it, who should pass the end of the court that minute but Jem Barnes and Stackleton, and a lot more of Dan's friends, on their way home from a card party at "The Water Lily;" and of course when they caught sight of Dan and Jerry standing like that, and knowing Dan's goings on with Mercy, of course they stopped to see the fun. Dan turned on his heel to go up to them.

Jerry griped him by the collar and jerked him back.

"Dan Harroway," says he, "you don't go out o' this yer court till you've giv me your promise as you'll never speak another word to my gal in your life."

"Don't I," said Dan, wrenching himself away; "we'll see about that. What, do you suppose I care for your girl; and if I did, why haven't I as much right to have my say to her as anyone else?"

"I'll tell you," said Jerry, his passion up as he heard all the young fellows laughing at him.

"Because, Dan Harroway, you haven't a rag to your back as belongs to you by good rights, nor a drop o' blood in your body that's been made by honest-earned wittles. You live by hook and by crook, spendin' here and takin' there, and betting, and gambling, and drinking. They tell me as you're proud, but I tell you, Dan Harroway, that me as cuts this yer poor figure by the side of you, have got more pride in me 'an you have, for I've got pride enough to keep me slaving and sweating in that ere hole as you calls yourself landlord of, from year's end to year's end, rathener I'd take a penny from the parish or any man alive to go to the feed o' them little uns."

"Then look you, Jerry Rouse," said Dan, flashing on him with his eyes as the young fellows came nearer, "you owe me two quarters' rent; if you've got the pride you're telling of, pay it me down now."

"I can't, you know it," Jerry said, with a groan; "I'd give my head if I could."

"Very well, you'll beg my pardon for every word you've said to me this night, or you'll suffer

for it. I'll give you till over Christmas-day; if you haven't begged my pardon or paid down your rent by then, you turn out, bag and baggage."

And Dan turned and walked away.

"Stop a bit," said Jerry, following him and laying his hand on his shoulder; "do you promise me what I asked you about my gal?"

"No," said Dan Harroway, fiercely, "I don't; is that plain?"

Jerry didn't answer him, but turned and walked home.

"Mercy," he said, taking off his apron as he came in at the door, "put on your bonnet and come along o' me. I'm a goin' to take you over to your grandmother's at Bassett, my wench. You can't bide here no longer."

With a face white as a sheet, Mercy got a handkerchief and rolled up a few things in it; among 'em I saw some dead flowers, and I knew by the long stalks what they were. Then she kissed 'em all round, and followed her father out of the door without speaking a word.

## CHAPTER IV.

### JERRY'S RACE FOR LIFE WITH THE CANDLE.

WHAT I'm going to tell you now about Jerry, I didn't see myself, but he's told it to me so many a time that I've got it all before me as clear and real as if I had seen it, and it had happened a week ago instead of forty years.

It was Christmas-eve, then, going on for eleven o' the clock; Jerry sat by himself, finishing Jem Barnes's Sunday boots, which he'd been patching up.

The candle stood on a three-legged stool in front of him, and every now and then Jerry would look at it, and each time he looked at it, his fingers flew the faster.

There were two inches of candle, and there was what a quick man would call a good hour's work. Two inches of candle and not a scrap more in the

house,—not a scrap more, most likely, in all the court. Few houses, indeed, at Gadshill-in-the-Fields had a scrap of bread in them that night, let alone candle or firing.

Two inches of candle and a good hour's work to do! It seemed as sure as fate the candle must go out before that work was done, yet Jerry looked at it and worked fiercer—looked at it and worked fiercer. His dirty, pallid, flat-nailed fingers flew, and the candle burned.

It was a race that would have held your breath to watch, a race for life or death. If Jerry's fingers won it, it was life, if the candle won it, it was death; for while he worked so that he could tell if one second was shorter weight than another, there came from the upstair room faint cries and wailings. And Jerry knew what it was. He had heard it in many a house this winter; but it had never been to his before.

It was a wolf up there in that room—a wolf gnawing away at his seven little children, and his poor sick wife—hunger, it was, and it had come upon them sudden and savage, and Jerry knew

that if it wasn't driven off that night it must devour them all away from him, devour him too, and the only thing he could drive it away with was the shilling he would get when he took Jem Barnes's boots home.

So he raced with the candle till the drops came out thick on his forehead.

There was one inch now, and there was more than half-an-hour's work to do.

The candle burned and the fingers flew—flew, ay, so fast, that every now and then Jerry felt in doubt as to whether they carried the thread along with them or not; but if he stopped to find out, his race was lost, for the candle had nothing to stop for, so he let 'em tremble and shake over the boot that was stuck between his knees.

The fingers flew, and the candle burned, the race was drawing to an end.

The candle blazed up.

Jerry stuck his last stitch.

The wick fell and went out.

Jerry hugged his boot, and gave a great cry. His job was done.

The moonlight falling through the dusty window showed him where his battered old hat lay on the chair. He snatched it up and the fellow boot, and ran out in his shirt-sleeves, calling up the dark narrow stairs as he went by them—

"Take the little uns to you, Nance, and keep 'em warm. I've done it, and I'll be back in a minute with some wittles."

## CHAPTER V.

### THE POOR COBBLER FINDS LIFE A SORE MISFIT.

"BACK in a minute," Jerry said; but it took a sharpish run to get him to Jem Barnes's house in five. When he got there, there wasn't a light to be seen in any of the windows. He knocked once. No one came. Twice—still no one came.

Jerry took hold of the knocker, and thumped it down every two seconds fierce and hard. Still no one came.

By and bye old Constable Mullinger turned up the street to see what the noise was about.

"Are you gone mad?" said he to Jerry. "Don't you see they're all out? Be off about your business, or I'll be helping you with your knocking."

Jerry reeled back into the middle of the road, and stared up at the house. He had never

thought of this. Had he run his race with the candle for nothing?"

No wonder old Mullinger thought he was mad, to see him standing there without his coat, his old hat stuck at the back of his head, and his boots in his hand, staring at the dark windows. Soon the cold began to go through and through him, and he turned, shivering and half stupified, and went back home.

Going in, he stumbled against the stairs and made a noise, and then he stood listening, feeling sure that all the seven little children would cry out to him for the food he had promised to be back with in a minute.

No. All was still—all except his own heart thumping away at the foot of the stairs.

"They've fell asleep," he said to himself; "they won't feel the wolf for a little while, not perhaps till I get 'em some work'us bread in the morning."

He wouldn't go up for fear of disturbing them, so he went and sat on his bench in the dusty moonlight, and took up a boot of little Tommy's

and his awl, and tried to work, just for the sake of keeping himself from thinking, and from feeling the gnawing at his inside.

He worked, but the thinking and the gnawing went on just the same.

He worked, but the dark handsome face of Dan Harroway kept coming between him and little Tommy's boot, making him grip his awl and breathe hard.

He worked, but the loneliness and the gnawing made him get so light and sharp in his wits that he couldn't sit still, so he stood up with his work in his hand.

By and bye he dropped the boot, and stood still, not breathing at all, with the awl in his hand.

A thought had come to him, a thought of how to muzzle the wolf.

He went to the foot of the stairs and listened—still all was quiet. He kicked off his boots, and crept up, feeling by the damp wall. The door was open, and Jerry went in and stood in the middle of the room, looking at the row of

ragged little beds that lay along the splintery floor. The moonlight fell upon each wisened sharp face, and each wisened dirty hand laying over the patchwork quilts.

Now, while Jerry stood looking at them all with that dreadful uncommon sharpness I told you of, which made him feel as if he could do anything in the world if he set his mind on it; he heard Nance muttering, and when he went to listen what she said, he found she was cursing him in her sleep for having married her. Jerry listened, and got all cold and stiff about the roots of his hair, and the room seemed to spin round and round him—beds, door, patched window, with the big yellow moon staring in it and all—all seemed to spin round; and Jerry looked after the spinning beds, and then at the spinning moon, and wished it away. He gripped his awl hard and fast, and flung himself down by the first of the beds. Still it seemed spinning away from him, and he made a clutch at it with his left hand, and when he had got it set his knee on it, then his left hand clutched a thin little

shoulder, clutched it so tight that there was a scream, and that scream woke Nance and all the rest; and taking him to have come back with the victuals, they all set up a wailing cry for joy, and stretched out their hands.

And Jerry lifted up his head and looked at the empty thin hands and hungry faces, and pointed to his awl, and said to 'em, with a great lift of his chest at every word—

"Look here, little uns, it's earned your bread all along, this yer, and if so be it can't arn your bread any more, can't it—can't it put you to—to —to sleep, little uns—just to sleep—only to sleep?"

He laid himself down on the bed. The bright tip of the awl glittered, and then was hidden in the clothes. He pressed himself closer and closer over the child, and his awl was in his hand under him. There was just a touch—a cold, sharp touch—on a bony chest, only a touch, and it was not Jerry's chest, yet it was Jerry who leapt to his feet, with almost a yell, as if a sword had gone through him. Leapt to his feet and cleared

the dark stairs in two springs, and rushed out of the house door, and away up the court, without ever a bit of shoe to his foot or coat to his back, or cap to his head;—rushed along towards the town-end of the court in his shirt and ragged trousers, and bare feet, and with his awl in his hand;—rushed as if a demon were after him;—rushed, and once he knocked himself against a post, like a blind, wild animal. Then he ran on till he got to the end of the court and out into the street—the dark still street, and he saw one man in it, and he made up to him. The man turned and seeing Jerry coming towards him with his awl, so wild and strange, began to quicken his pace.

But Jerry, he got up to him, and made a spring, and threw both his arms round him so violently that the man was felled to the ground.

"Don't run away from me! Feller creetur, brother, I got more on me nor I can bear, come and help me. You sha'n't go away till you've helped me!"

"Let me go," said the man, struggling; "let me go free, will you?"

"Hah!" cried Jerry; and looking down on his face, with his knee on his chest, and his awl raised above him, he saw it was Dan Harroway.

The cause of all his trouble that night was there under his knee, and the awl which through him had been nearly turned against his little children was in his hand. Didn't it seem like justice put into his own hands to deal? The knee planted on Dan's chest shook, and the eyes looking down upon him blazed like balls of fire.

Dan Harroway thought his last was come. Suddenly he felt the weight gone off his chest, and looking up he saw the back of a ragged figure, which seemed to be wringing its hands, with the awl in them, and then he saw it run back down the dark court.

Yes, Jerry was running back. He had been to the world for help, and it had sent him greater temptation. Where was he to go now?

Now, while Jerry rushed back down the dark quiet court, crying to himself, "Who'll help me?

Is there nobody as'll help me?" there flashed upon him a recollection of a story he had heard—a story which had always struck him as being much too hard to believe in, and much too wonderful to be at all true; but now, I say, the recollection of it struck upon him like a sudden light in his darkness.

He began to run faster. He passed his own house. He came to the other end of the court, and out into the great brick-fields.

Just before him there was a high heap of bricks and stones and rubbish, where a house had been pulled down. Jerry had but one thought just then, he wanted to get high. He seemed as if he couldn't get high enough for what he wanted. So he began to climb this mound, sticking his bare feet into the sharp stones and broken bricks till they bled, and helping himself up with his hands till they bled, and when he got to the very top he was well nigh fainting, and he fell upon his knees.

The big, set moon seemed to be on a level with his head as it stared at him through two window-holes of a half-finished house, and it lighted

everything; the pool of black water below him, the frosted rushes growing round it, and the grey line of field rats passing from the cellar of one of the new houses to a hole in the clay bank.

Jerry threw up his two arms, still holding the awl, and cried out as loud as ever he could cry in his faintness,—

"If You as made me," says he, "can see me now; if You knows me better than I knows You, come anigh me! I don't arst You for myself. There's somethin' a tearin' my inside like a wild beast, but that I can bear. What I arst You is, save my little uns from me! Save Dan Harroway from me! Come anigh me, wherever You are, and lay hold on this yer. I'm only a poor human creetur, and there's more put on me nor I can bear, an' it's makin' a devil of me. I don't know how to get at You, I don't know no prayers; but I tell You, as I want You; if ever any poor creetur You've made ever wanted You, I do. Oh, come anigh me! Come anigh me!"

*Did* anything come anigh him? Jerry says as the wind rose he heard a rustling all about the

mound, like a swooping down of great wings or garments, and his hand got loose, and the awl went whirling down, and fell with a splash into the black water; and Jerry, when he heard the splash, fell a trembling and hiding his face with his two hands.

He wasn't alone, he says; the sweep-down of wings and the talking in the wind went on. For some time—how long he couldn't tell—he seemed to be lifted right up out of his trouble, and he didn't feel the sharp stones under his knees: and he stayed with those that seemed to have come about him till the moon went down in the window-hole.

At last the bark of a dog made him remember himself, and he looked up, and finding his awl gone, gave a great shout for joy.

"You've heered me," he said, "You've heered me; and I ain't alone, nor my little uns ain't alone; they're got a better father 'n me."

Then he came down, slipping and sliding among the stones, and began to run home all shaking

and close to the ground like a lamb just out of the lion's jaw.

As he ran the dog he had heard bark came across his path with a crust of bread in his mouth, and Jerry seized him by the nape, and took the crust from him, and ran home to divide it amongst his children.

When he had got in, though, that wild beast he had told of on the mound, clawed him for it; and he was just going to fall upon and devour it, and had got it between his teeth, when another wonderful old story coming across him, made him stop and think.

He cleared the table: he moved all the rubbish on the floor on one side with his foot, and covered it over. Then he began looking about for some kind of a table-cloth. He found one, clean and white, in a drawer, and he felt ready to cry with gratefulness to Nance that she should have such a thing. He spread it on the table, and then he took his crust and laid it in the middle: and after looking at it a long time, he went out softly and shut the door.

He crawled upstairs once more, so faint that he could scarce drag one foot after the other.

The children were all awake and wailing still. Jerry went and took 'em up, and cuddled 'em one by one in his poor tired arms, and said, with the tears running down his cheeks,—

"Don't cry, little uns; I've been out and I couldn't get you nothing, but coming back I see a dog with a crust in his mouth, and I lugged it away, and it lays on the table down below, and I'm a goin' to arst Him as they say made seven loaves and five little fishes feed four thousand creeturs, if He wont make that ere little crust below enough to fill us all by mornin'. So go to sleep, little uns, and you Nance, my woman, go to sleep—go to sleep all on you, and let Him do His will by that ere little crust; and we'll go down in the mornin' all together and see what we shall find."

And Jerry went to lie down himself, but somehow he felt as if he'd no right to lay among them that night after his evil thoughts, so he went and stretched himself on the landing outside the

threshold of the door, and by and bye they all fell sound asleep.

It was a cold place, was Jerry's. But the wind that whistled up the stairs and came up through every crack and cranny of the old boards, only made him sleep the sweeter, for he dreamed it was the great wings that had come anigh him on the mound.

And so they slept; and there in the room below, all by itself in the moonlight, on the clean white tablecloth, lay THE CRUST.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE HAUNTED CRUST.

Now in the morning Jerry woke with the sun on his face, and he got up and woke Nance and the children. He helped Nance on with her things, for she was very sick, and dressed each of the little ones himself, and while he dressed them, each had a different dream to tell him about the CRUST, and the angels that were making a feast for them out of it. And Jerry he listened, feeling as if his heart would burst, for what could he say if they all went down and opened the door and found only the CRUST. Still he daren't gainsay that there would be a feast. He washed them all, and made them kneel down and say the prayers Mercy had taught them, and he made the dressing and the prayers take as much time as he could, for he had great fear of going to the CRUST.

At last, shaking in every limb, he took up the two youngest, one on each arm, and went to the stairs, two more took hold of his coat, and Nance dragged herself along after with the others, and so they all went slowly down.

But when they had got to the foot of the stairs, and Jerry had laid his thumb on the latch of the room door, his heart quite failed him, for he seemed to see, before he opened it, the CRUST, lying there with the marks of the dog's teeth in it, and all just as he had left it over night; so he turned and said to them, in a light kind of way,—

"P'raps they haven't done yet, little uns. You won't be disappointed if so be they ain't?"

But seven pairs of black sharp eyes looked at him so suspicious and so keen, that Jerry thought he'd better get the worst over at once, so he lifted the latch and pushed the door in.

He gave one look into the room before him, and then turned back suddenly, as if he'd had fire blown into his face.

"Nance, Nance!" he said, "here's a judgment on us! Here's more'n I can bear. Oh, look, old woman! Down on your knees and look. Oh! little uns, I didn't believe not half myself — but come along! come and look!"

The father and mother, on their knees outside the threshold, and the children clinging to them, all stared into the room.

There *was* a feast spread on the cobbler's table. Ay, a delicate feast. There was white bread and there was wine, rich pasties, and in the middle where the crust had lain, there was a shining silver basket of bright Christmas fruit. It was a fair table, I can tell you, for I saw it. Yes, I was there, and I saw it. And I saw Jerry, too, kneeling with his wife Nance, and the children on the threshold.

"I knowed as You'd heered me," cried Jerry, presently, lifting his big full eye to the grimy ceiling. "And whatever hand You've done this by, human creetur's hand or not, me and my little uns thanks You for it, and will never a

done thanking You for it, while there's breath in our bodies; and I forgive Dan Harroway as You've forgive me. I forgive him, and I'm at peace with him, let him do what he likes."

Just as they were going to get up from their knees, the Christmas waits in the court began, and among them there was Nell Gwire and Alice Blane, the sweetest singers in all the country side, and the music seemed to hold Jerry and the rest to their knees, for coming just then it was like angels' voices giving them a welcome to the feast. Nance and him both began to cry and cling together; and then she, who had been a good singer in her time, but had'nt sung for temper twenty years, began joining in, low and soft, with her face raised and her black hair falling all about her to the ground;—and one at a time the little things caught up the tune and sung out loud and shrill, like starved sparrows at the sight of rain. So loud and shrill and piercing that I couldn't stand it long, but went and picked them up and brought them into the room. When they all came in, treading as if the

ground wasn't common ground, Jerry saw me and said,—

"Is this yer doings, Matthew?" says he, and I said, "No."

"Then," says Jerry, "tell me what man's doings it is, that I may thank him, and that all my little uns may thank him."

"Jerry," said I, taking him apart, "when you ran out in your sore trouble last night, you met a man."

"Ay!" says Jerry, looking at me hard.

"You threw him down and told him your trouble, and before he had got free of his first fright, you saw who he was and left him."

"Ay," said Jerry again, with a shudder.

"You went up a mound in the brick-fields?"

"Ay."

"You went up and told your trouble to some one else. You didn't see that man following you and listening to you? No. Nor you didn't see that man looking at you through that window, when you laid your crust out."

"No," said Jerry.

"Well, he saw you, then; he saw all, and he came and knocked me up out of my bed, and we went in the night to Bassett and fetched Mercy. And that man fetched the best silver plate out of his father's house, and the best Christmas pasties and wine, and we three laid the feast together."

"And where is that man?" said Jerry, hardly noticing Mercy as she came from where she was feeding the children.

"When he had laid the feast, Jerry, he went outside."

"Is he there now?" said Jerry.

"Perhaps he is."

Jerry said nothing more, but went out.

Dan was there.

"Dan Harroway," said Jerry. "I've spoke words to you as I can't never take back, because they was true."

"I don't wan't you to take 'em back, Jerry Rouse," said Dan. "I know they were true."

"Then, Dan Harroway, though I can't take them words back, I can tell you this, and that is

as this yer thing you've done this yer Christmas-eve, has made me feel that for you I never felt for mortal man afore. You ain't only spread them fine wittles in there, but there's a somethin' you've brought anigh me as I've hungered for without knowin' it this many a year. I don't arst you to come in, I ain't worthy as you should come in; but Dan Harroway, I should like to shake you by the hand, and I should like the little uns to thank you."

There! I suppose you guess the rest.

Of course Dan didn't go in then, nor let Jerry show him off to the children as the angel in top-boots that had been sent to make these wonderful things out of the CRUST. Of course he didn't sit at the end of the table by Mercy all the time of the feast; and have those bright top-boots smeared all over afterwards by thankful dirty little hands. And of course Jerry got turned out by his landlord next day!

They were married, Dan and Mercy, when the blue hyacinths came round again, and you could

smell nothing else from Gadshill-in-the-Fields to the church, and Mercy wore them in her hair.

END OF THE HAUNTED CRUST.*

* This story was accidentally published in a periodical under my name; a fact that did not reach my knowledge till the sheets were printed off, and the error admitted of no practical remedy.—J. S.

## TWENTY-SIX MINUTES PAST ELEVEN.

Now I had told Jerry's story of the "Haunted Crust" very slowly, and in a low voice, so that young Martin, to catch my words, was forced to bend a little forwards, and keep his eye on me, and by these means he did not even heed the clock striking eleven, nor notice that we were slipping some way on into the *last hour*.

No sooner, however, had I told how Jerry came to be a better man, and how Dan and Mercy were happily married in the end, than I looked to see him lift his eyes to the clock. But he did not, but sat still in his chair, looking on the ground, and pondering, and it struck me that his face was very like the graven image in the church of Julian Argent, the most noble and famous ancestor of the Pole family, of which

Martin's family was a junior branch. Presently he said, still looking on the ground, and speaking as if to himself—

"Could such suffering be natural and intended by God? Was there no one to blame for it?"

"I don't know, sir," said I, taking upon myself to answer, though he had not spoken to me; "unless, perhaps, the Squire of Pickersgill, like the squire of another place I know, shut himself up with his own sick fancies, and left to other hands the work that God made to be his work alone.

I felt his blue eyes flashing angrily on my face, and Mr. James said—

"Come, Matthew, you had better go now: I think you are forgetting yourself."

"And depend upon it, sir," said I, "the work that's given one man to do can't be put off on other hands, without wrong coming of it somehow. And now, as Mr. James wants me gone, sir, shall I say good night to you?"

"No, Matthew, sit still, and listen to me. I see very well what it is you wish to make me

understand; it is that I have not struggled enough against this—this strange disease—I can call it nothing else, attendant upon this day. Now, to show you that this is really not so, and that I despise this state of helplessness as heartily as yourself, I will read you something which I have written even during these last few days; and which, though it may not have much worth in itself, will, at least, bear witness that I have tried to turn my thoughts in healthier directions. James, will you give me that paper from the drawer of the cabinet against the bed?"

Mr. James did so, and then seated himself near his brother, with a show of great interest.

And Martin unfurled the roll of paper, and began to read. Perhaps there was not much in the verses themselves. I do not think there was. But though Martin's voice was weak, now and then there were fine deep, stirring notes in it; and he had not read many lines before I began to fancy myself listening to some music, sad and noble, down among the graven figures on the Argent's tomb.

# JULIAN.

## A LEGEND OF RAVENSHURST.

Come they, rising dim before me,
Princely towers of Ravenshurst;
Come the legends crowding o'er me
That those shadowy walls have nursed.

Steeped in blood, and dark, and mournful,
Legends of the kingly pride
Of the Argents, grand and scornful,
Feared and hated far and wide.

As I gaze, come lord and lady,
Laid for ages under ground;
Sauntering up the alleys shady,
With the falcon and the hound.

As I listen, armour clanging
Echoes through the courts and halls;
And I see the women hanging
Weeping on the terrace walls.

And while yet a sombre glory
Overshadows towers and trees,
Memories of one noble story
Touch me like a healthful breeze.

* * *

Pondering many an old tradition,
Filled with his dead father's praise,
Boundless in his great ambition,
Julian dreamed away his days.

Past and future fixed and bound him,
Filled his fancy, fired his breast;
While the present gathered round him
Vengeance of the long oppressed.

While he toys with rusty armour,
Reads the mottoes on the shields,
Tools are forged for serf and farmer,
Needed not in parks and fields.

While he dreams of old Crusaders,
  While his sword rusts in its sheath,
Night by night the near invaders
  Gather strength from holt and heath.

Terrace peacocks shrieking coarsely
  Warn him of the people's hate;
And the ravens, croaking hoarsely,
  Clamorous watch the coming fate.

* * *

Came the autumn sunsets mellow,
  Gilding lattices and domes;
Fell the dead leaves, red and yellow,
  Leaving bare the ravens' homes.

Came the mountain whirlwinds tearing,
  And the murky clouds hung low;
To each old ancestral bearing
  Clung the diamond-fretted snow.

Anvils ring and red fire blazes
  In the smithies night by night;
Darker grow the desperate faces,
  Welding freedom by its light.

* * *

Turning mystic lettered pages
In the Christmas twilight dim,
Deep into the vanished ages
Julian's fancy guided him.

Past the brawny yeomen, laden
With the yulelog and the peat,
Breathless rushed a peasant maiden,
Breathless fell at Julian's feet.

Fled the pageant quaint and pleasant
Hovering in his golden dream;
Down into the busy present—
Rushing like a mountain stream—

Dropped his spirit, as he listened
To her wildly-uttered tale;
And his dark eye dangerous glistened,
While each swarthy serf grew pale.

"Ho!" he cried, "my trusty yeomen,
Ye who fought for Marmaduke—
Do ye fear these base-born foemen,
Armed with spade and shepherd's crook?

" Sixty archers, keen and steady,
Hath my kinsman at the Gorse.
Gilbert, get my armour ready!
Jasper, saddle me my horse!

" I will ride through bush and bracken,
And be back with help before
They who wait for night to blacken
Set a foot on Carmel Moor."

And his stalwart form grew larger
As he left the banquet-hall;
Leapt upon the stamping charger
They had saddled at his call.

Soon they saw his helmet flashing
High above the woody holt;
Saw the heavy charger dashing
Downward like a thunderbolt.

But his anger gaining on him
At the hamlet made him pause,
Asking had they turned upon him,
Foes and traitors, without cause?

Slow he rode, and gazed before him,
Meeting many a roofless cot.
Slower still the charger bore him,
Still the rider spurred him not

For he heard a mother singing
In a ruined cot apart;
And her shrill voice, wild and ringing,
Like a dagger smote his heart.

For she sang how children perished
Daily in the stricken land,
While the feudal lord was cherished
In his princely castle grand.

Sang how men, how women tender,
Worked in bondage and disgrace
To maintain the ancient splendour
Of the Argents' haughty race.

Came a light upon him breaking;
Fell the reins upon his horse;
And his great heart, slowly waking,
Shook him with its wild remorse.

Every grand heroic story
Of the Argents' brilliant fame,
Failed to make his race's glory
Overcome his present shame.

Not a glory could he borrow
From their deeds in distant lands;
But his face, in shame and sorrow,
Fell upon his mailèd hands.

Through the cold and desolation,
Like a spirit of despair,
Rose the mother's lamentation—
"Justice! justice!" was her prayer.

"Justice! O, my heart is riven!"
And he raised his hand on high,
Shouting, "By the God in heaven,
They shall have it, though I die!"

* * *

They who stand with fingers numbing,
Watching from the towers of stone,
Tremble as they see him coming
Back to Ravenshurst alone.

See again his helmet flashing
High above the woody holt;
See the heavy charger dashing
Downward like a thunderbolt.

* * *

Through the limes and chestnuts arching,
Towards the court and terrace white,
Come the hungry peasants marching
In the middle of the night.

Ragged, hungry, wolfish were they;
Strange their weapons, ghastly, rude;
All the wrongs and hatred bear they
Of a far-off multitude.

But nor men-at-arms nor warder
Challenged the tumultuous rout,
As they crossed the pleasaunce-border,
As they rang defiance out.

No one in the hall to meet them—
Open doors inviting guests—
Silence only there to greet them;
Tables covered as at feasts.

Jealous, huddling close, they bore them,
Pausing in the middle space,
All their weapons shaking o'er them—
Trembling, clinking o'er each face.

On the daïs now appearing
Stands the Argent pale and proud,
And the bright sword he is bearing
Gleams to eyes that thirst for blood.

Then, like storms suspended bursting
Fiercer for their own delay,
Onward sweeps the serfdom thirsting,
Each to strike him, all to slay.

Calm as death the Argent stands there,
Rings his voice like trump of doom,
Through all souls, and numbs all hands there,
While he speaks as from a tomb:

" Yes, I know, though late, God sendeth
Ministers his work to do,
And the pride that scarcely bendeth
Unto Him must stoop to you.

"I have wronged you; do your pleasure,—
Grant but this—my latest breath—
Say I mourned one only treasure—
All my people's love—in death."

Not a word more would he utter;
Flung his sword upon the ground;
And its echoing ring and clatter
Broke the deadly stillness round.

O, the cry that rent the chamber!
How their weapons fall on his!
How they swarm and how they clamber
All about his knees to kiss

Hands that ever more shall bless them—
Ever work for them and theirs!
Hands that seek their hands to press them,
Linking future fates and cares.

Soon a plenteous feast is spreading
In the old, ancestral hall,
And the goodly yulelog shedding
Light and jollity o'er all.

Thus the past no longer bound him;
In the present was his pride,
With his people gathered round him,
In the blessed Christmas-tide.

END OF JULIAN.

# WAITING THE STROKE.

WHILE Martin read, Mr. James and I had had our eyes upon the clock; and one of us—for I cannot answer for both—was praying heartily that the ballad might be long enough to carry us over the dreaded time. But when I found it was winding to an end, while the hand had yet to travel twenty minutes to get to the appointed moment, I left watching the clock, and looked at Martin.

On reading the last word, he laid the paper down, and glanced towards his brother.

Now, if my Mistress Pole had risen from her grave and bid Martin beware, for all her fear and dread of twenty years was now confined to these twenty minutes, it could hardly have had a worse effect on him than the sight of his brother's face just then. Mr. James seemed for the instant to have forgotten us both, as he sat looking up at

the clock, and his white face with drops standing on his brows, his white parted lips, his very hands clutching the arms of the chair, seemed waiting—listening—expecting, as though he had his own reason for anxiety. Martin shrunk back in his chair as he watched him, and his face grew rigid and pallid as a dead man's; the shadow of his doom seemed to have fallen on him.

As for me, with those two faces before me, I could scarcely draw my breath.

There, on the top of the clock, was the figure of Old Time, grey-bearded and grim; and he seemed to glower at us, as if he knew he was just going to make an ugly cut with that long scythe of his; and then the seconds that we three sat and counted, they ticked out so loud, and in such furious haste, one after the other, you felt as if each had seen some dreadful thing at its heels, and came to warn us.

Tick, tick, tick, tick, they came crowding on louder, faster, nearer, till they seemed to be the very footsteps of that nameless thing Martin was expecting; and the noise of the fountain mixing

in with them was like the cold, near rustling of garments.

Another minute, and there fell a stillness, a sudden dead stillness; the clock might have stopped, and the fountain failed, for aught we knew; we could hear nothing; we only *saw*.

And what did we see? What was it the last gleam of lightning had shown standing in the window between us and the white fountain? Surely it was a figure, a woman's figure, in a cloak and falling hood; and surely the face was brown and fierce, and surely the cloak was red. We held our breaths till the lightning should come again to make the dusky figure plain to us; and while we waited for it there was a noise as of a heavy fall in my Mistress Pole's bedchamber over head; and at that instant the figure at the window sprang into the room, and standing in the midst of us, pointed at Martin Pole, as he lay prostrate in his chair.

"Have I kept my word? It's the last day, but I'm here; it's the last hour, but the curse is falling on your head. The gipsy's curse is falling. Martin Pole, your hour is come!"

James Hilman was the first to move.

"Begone!" he cried, in a husky, trembling voice; "begone, or I'll set the dogs on you!"

The gipsy turned and looked at him.

"*You*," she said, mockingly; "*you* set the dogs on me, will you?" Then, stretching out her arm, she cried again, at the top of her shrill, cracked voice—

"Martin Pole, I say your hour is come!"

Was Martin dead? He lay so stiff and still in his chair, and his face was so strange, that looking at him I had no power to move.

"Look at him," I said, clutching Hilman's arm, "look at him!"

He did, and for one instant I thought I saw the same quick flash of triumph that had passed over his face when locking up the will. But I could not be sure, for it passed away quick as lightning, and a look of pain and fear took its place, and he turned and began to rave at the gipsy again.

"Get out with you, mad woman—hag—beast! Get out with you!"

"SILENCE!"

Who was it said this, making the rusty armour on the walls ring as if it had heard a war-cry from the cold tomb where the knights, whose blood had stained it, lay asleep? What voice was it whose clear, strong command made the smooth face of the hypocrite grow yellow with fear, and the impostor silent? It was my master's voice, it was Martin Pole's; and my heart leapt up to hear it.

He was standing erect, pale, but with living fire in his eyes. He looked at none of us, but was listening intently, listening to some far-off sounds—vague, rumbling noises in my mistress Pole's room over head.

He stood so for some seconds, and then strode to the table and took from it the pistol Hilman had laid there; took that up in one thin, white hand, and the heavy silver candle-stand in the other. Then came the clear command again, ringing through the room—"Matthew, make fast the windows, and follow me."

And I obeyed, feeling as if I was dreaming

some wild, fantastic dream. When we went out of the room he stopped, and said—

"Let slip the bolt"—and I did, locking in James Hilman and the gipsy.

Martin strode along before me, and the stone passages rung beneath his feet, as if giving welcome to the long silent step.

On he went, almost faster than I could keep up with him, and never stopped till he stood at the door of his mother's bed-chamber.

There he stood still, for a strange sight was to be seen.

The door, which ever since my mistress Pole's funeral had been unlocked by none save Martin and Joan Sicklemore, was now thrown widely open, and a dim light burned in the room. A dim light burned where it had been set upon the floor without a candlestick, and sent huge shadows leaping up the walls on every side. In the middle of the floor, broken open and overturned, lay my mistress Pole's jewel casket; and beside it pearl and ruby necklaces, rings, coronets, and bracelets, were heaped pell-mell like so much

rubbish. A little farther back, listening, and staring towards the door, stood a swarthy, black-haired man; with one coarse hand closed over my mistress Pole's watch, set with diamonds; while the other clutched a little iron crowbar, thick and heavy, and pointed at one end.

Martin took a stride forwards into the room, and the man, after looking round the walls in vain for another door to escape by, flung down the watch, and, raising his weapon, made a rush at us; but in an instant, Martin's pistol was raised, fired, and through the smoke I saw the man staggering back, shot in the leg. He caught hold of my mistress Pole's 'broidery frame for support, but reeled and fell heavily to the floor, dragging the frame with him.

No sooner had Martin fired, than we heard a frightful clamour in the room below; shrill wailings, and frantic beating at the door and windows.

"For Heaven's sake, sir," I said, "come down; your brother and the woman are murdering one another; *he's* safe enough for the present. Come down, sir, do."

He looked at the man an instant, as he lay groaning faintly, and then came down the stairs, leaning on my shoulder.

As soon as we unbolted the door, we saw Mr. James sitting just where we had left him, craven and white, watching the gipsy trying to unfasten the shutters.

The instant she saw us, she rushed across the room, and flung herself at Martin's feet.

"What have you done to him? O my sir, you haven't shot him dead! No, no, you haven't; I hear him a-groaning. But you won't let 'em hang him? He's my son, sir; and I'm his miserable mother; and as for hurtin' a hair of your head, my sweet gentleman, I'd never a thought on it. I'd never a' come anigh the place, sir, but yon man let it all out to me, as how Spanking Poll (I knowed her, sir; she was hanged at Cork, last Whitsuntide)—he let it out to me, how Poll spoke ugly to my lady—my noble lady—your sweet mother, sir. And he told me you lay here a dyin', and the curse was heavy on yer, and would I come and say I meant nothing

by it; and then—mark ye, gentlemen—then, when I says I wasn't the woman, and I shouldn't come, what does yer faithful steward and yer lovin' brother do, but tells me not to say nothing about it to the others in our tent, cos they might take advantage of it, if they knew as the sight of a gipsey coming in sudden might be the death of you, my sweet sir. *He wants you dead!* I warrant you he knew some on us 'ud be here before the strikin' o' the clock."

"Silence," said Martin, sinking into the chair I put for him. "If you speak truly, your son shall suffer no more than the punishment he has already received. Matthew, call one of the men, and have this woman and her son locked in somewhere for the night. Let some one look to the wound."

I did as he told me, but got back pretty soon, you may be sure, to see what would happen between the two brothers. The moment Martin saw me, he said, throwing me a key—

"Matthew, you saw where Ferrers put the will. Get it out."

I did so, and when he held it in his hand, he said—

"James, I am not satisfied with this plan of mine. I shall alter it. Instead of keeping you dependent on me all my life, I shall settle an annuity on you; and as I intend, in future, to manage my own affairs, I would rather that we lived apart. You will please, then, consider this your home only till you have made arrangements to move elsewhere. As for this"—

And he tore the will in two.

"We will forget it has ever been made. Good night; but before you go to your room, perhaps you will oblige me by leaving the keys here. Thank you." And so they parted for ever. I may as well tell you here that the honest gentleman soon went off to Australia with a lot of money that Martin gave him in place of the annuity.

As he closed the door after him, Martin and I both at the same instant looked up at the clock.

One minute to twelve.

He saw me looking with him; perhaps he saw something in my fools of eyes more than I wanted him to see; any way he rose from his chair and grasped my hand with both his own, and stood so still waiting for this last minute to pass over.

We were standing close to the window, which I had thrown open again, because I had seen him looking faint.

What a minute that was! The seconds became like footsteps again, and the fountain's noise like the near rustling of garments.

Martin grasped my hand tighter.

"Matthew," he whispered, "I almost fear now, my whole heart longs so for life."

"Courage, sir, courage; hark!"

The clock began to strike.

He held my hand tighter and tighter as we both stood counting the strokes, and each one seemed to vibrate through his body. When we had counted five we began to hear strange muffled noises all about us, without the house and within.

But we stood there counting with our hearts, as I may say, and not breathing, but with Martin's

words in my ears, which he repeated in a kind of half defiance—"*It may be not till the last second of the striking of the clock.*"

TEN—ELEVEN—TWELVE!

He let go my hand and stood erect, a noble smile lighting up his face. Then he came towards me, holding out both his hands, but he was stopped half-way by such a peal of bells as Throgmorden, and Chistledean in the parish of Throgmorden, had not heard for many a long year. And no sooner had they begun, than all the country seemed to wake and join in their clamour. Bonfires spit, and crackled, and flared on the hills all round. Crowds of well-known faces came near to us from the lawn and by-paths, and a harp began to twang, and a fiddle to squeak; but in two minutes, bells, bonfires, harp and fiddle, all were drowned in one tremendous shout for Martin Pole.

"Matthew, what does this mean?" he said, with a husky voice.

"Mean, sir? why, bless me," said I, "you're twenty-one."

"But *now*—why have they come now?" he asked.

"Because, sir," said I, "I knew it was no use their coming before. But we were not going to have it glided over altogether. No, no, Mr. Martin, not exactly, sir. Come, sir, there's a grand supper in the hall."

"Matthew," he said, "I feel as if these twenty years I have lain in a heavy sleep. This night, this moment, for the first time in my life, I am fully awake. God grant it may be a happy awakening for you all. It shall not be my fault if it is not."

He turned, and leaning on my shoulder, went out, down the passage towards the dining hall; and as we went, the bells, the music, the servants, the stones echoing under Martin Pole's firm tread, the dogs coming half-timidly, half-joyfully to meet him—everything we could hear or see within and without, seemed to be crying—

Up and doing—up and doing! The master is awake!

THE END.

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